



HESTER *of the* GRANTS

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HESTER OF THE GRANTS



“The Grants will not surrender. They have not
conquered *us*.”—Page 49.

HESTER OF THE GRANTS

A Romance of Old Bennington

BY
THEODORA PECK



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TO
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

“The Hampshire Grants in particular, a country unpeopled and almost unknown in the last war, now abounds in the most active and most rebellious race of the Continent, and hangs like a gathering storm on my left.”

Report of General Burgoyne.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE PARTING OF THE WAYS	9
II OUT OF THE STORM	16
III NATHAN BENNETT	23
IV A NIGHT OF PEACE AND WAR	36
V Ho! ALL TO THE BORDERS! VER- MONTERS, COME DOWN!	55
VI ONE MAN PLAYS MANY PARTS	73
VII THE LITTLE BLUE-BELL OF THE WOODS	94
VIII THE TALE ONE EVENING TOLD	103
IX AS FOE TO FOE	122
X A SPRIG OF EVERGREEN	139
XI ON THE VERGE OF BATTLE	155

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
XII COUNCILS OF WAR	174
XIII BENNINGTON BATTLE	184
XIV DEEPENING SHADOWS	202
XV A MATTER OF CHOICE	222
XVI SHALL A FRIEND BETRAY A FRIEND? . .	235
XVII THE SHEATHED SWORD	250
XVIII THE GOD OF THE HILLS	262
XIX THE MESSAGE OF COCHISE	280
XX THE RIFT IN THE PINES	301
XXI THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN	317
XXII THE ANSWER OF ETHAN ALLEN	339
XXIII NEWS FROM BENNINGTON	361
XXIV "UNTIL THE DAY BREAK"	372
XXV THE LAST OUTPOST	391
XXVI "AND THE SHADOWS FLEE AWAY" . .	404

Hester of the Grants

CHAPTER I

THE PARTING OF THE WAYS

WITH a troubled face and frowning brow Ezra Robinson of Bennington left the village behind him and wheeled his horse into the valley-road leading to his home. He rode slowly, his hand loosely grasping the rein, his head bowed. Only occasionally did he raise his eyes to the beautiful valley and the circle of distant hills, bathed in the glory of a summer morning. His thoughts were of other things.

When the road began to rise toward a wooded hill some little distance ahead he roused himself, and swept an anxious glance behind him. Then he gave his handsome brown mare a touch of the whip that made her take the rising slope at a canter.

At the summit of the hill a little spring, bubbling from a cleft rock by the roadside, made a tempting silvery basin in the hollow of a log. While the horse drank, the man sat and listened, now fully

aroused and on the alert for the slightest sound. The mare finished her drink and shook her dripping nostrils with a little snort of pleasure. Yet her master gave her no sign to start. Being now placed so that he could command a view of the road in both directions, Ezra Robinson sat and waited.

His figure was tall and strongly knit, clad in a white shirt, and breeches and coat of the dark-grey homespun common to Colonial times. Tall riding-boots came nearly to his knees. He wore a three-cornered hat, and his hair was tied in a short queue at the back of his neck. Across his saddle lay the never-absent musket, its accompanying powder-horn swinging from the cord over his shoulders. He was not under forty-eight, yet his dark-brown hair was but slightly tinged with grey, the face strong, the forehead wide and high, with grey eyes that could be kind when they smiled.

Ten minutes had passed when the sound of hoofs was heard in the direction of the village, and a moment later a young man on horseback appeared around a bend in the road. Half-way up the hill he dismounted, and taking his horse by the bridle, began to ascend the remainder of the way.

“ You have come at last, Ellis,” cried Ezra Robinson. “ What made you so late, man? I had almost given you up.”

“ Have patience, Mr. Robinson,” returned the

other, with a slightly mocking bow. "I have made what haste I could. Thirty miles have I ridden since daybreak, and my steed is well-nigh done for."

He laid a hand on the neck of his horse, which was spotted here and there with flecks of white foam.

"Have you decided the matter of which we were speaking?" he asked in a low tone.

"Not yet, not yet," returned Robinson guardedly. "It is not a decision to be leaped at. I must take time. Sometimes I think it cannot be done. Judge of what it means to me—such a step. Loss of everything life holds dear." He paused. "And Hester, Hester," he added softly, as if to himself.

The younger man made a gesture of impatience.

"Come, come, Mr. Robinson, we have discussed all this before. Think how you have been treated; slighted, pushed aside, ignored. Why should you hesitate to give yourself to the party to which you belong? The King is not like this pack of rebels. He gives reward where it is due. I tell you," he went on with heat, "this Continental Congress of yours is a set of arrant knaves, and fools beside."

"Softly, lad, softly," warned Ezra Robinson. "We are not shut within four walls, and may not talk at random."

"Walls have listeners; we are freer here,"

returned his companion with a reckless toss of the head. "But I see no use, Mr. Robinson, in discussing this matter all day. I am weary, and my horse needs rest. Since I may not stop at the Cata-mount Tavern, I must ask shelter elsewhere. When you have made up your mind, I shall be glad to speak further." So saying he swung into the saddle, and turned his horse's head.

"There is no just cause for anger, Mark," exclaimed Ezra Robinson, laying a restraining hand on his companion's bridle-rein. "Why will you not come home with me, and share our hospitality, as you have done before?"

"Do you think I should be welcome to Mrs. Robinson and Miss Hester?" asked Ellis, with eyes on a distant bend of the road.

"What a question, lad!" cried Robinson. "A friend of mine is always welcome to them, and Polly's eyes will gladden at your coming, as you know."

"Thank you for your kindness, Mr. Robinson. But to-day I may not avail myself of it. There is a house between here and Arlington, where I can rest, and then to saddle and away. So farewell till we meet again. But do not sleep too many nights on a certain urgent matter."

He gave his horse a light touch of the spur, and rode away.

Ten minutes later Ezra Robinson, emerging

from the woods, came within sight of his home. The house stood on the crest of a slightly sloping hill two miles west of the village of Bennington. To north and south lay apple-orchards and wide fields of wheat and Indian corn. Behind it the green meadow-land rose gradually. The house itself was strongly built of pine, and painted white, in the style then common to all the northern Colonies, with a certain stateliness of its own. Inside a wide hall ran through the centre, with rooms opening from it on either side, an oaken staircase, broad and winding, and in each room a wide-mouthed chimney. The kitchen, which extended the entire width of the building, was long and large, with high rafters and small-paned windows opening on a garden gay with sweet-alyssum, love-in-a-mist and marigolds.

It was not ten o'clock when Ezra Robinson drew rein in the door-yard, but colonial households were early to rise and by that time much had been done within-doors. For an hour past Mrs. Robinson had been seated at her spinning-wheel; Hester was carding wool, while Polly scoured pewter in the kitchen.

Hester, hearing her father's voice, let fall her unfinished work and darted down to greet him.

"Oh, father, what is the news?" she cried eagerly.

"News? no news at all!" he returned im-

patiently. "They expect a messenger hourly, so rumour goes, but that doesn't help us. I've had my ride for naught."

He paused with his eyes on the girl before him, and his angry mood faded. In her gown of blue-grey linen, with folded white kerchief, the soft colour deepening in her face and her brown hair tossed by the wind, Hester was too bright a picture to look upon unmoved.

"Run back to the house, Hester," he said quickly. "I must ride to the further wheat-field and see how the work goes on."

Hester retraced her steps, pausing in the doorway to watch him out of sight.

When she entered the kitchen her cousin Polly looked up eagerly.

"No news?" she cried, disappointed, as Hester shook her head. "Said he nothing of Neil Barton?" demanded Polly, with a glance of mischievous black eyes.

Hester's fair face clouded a little; at which sign Polly took warning.

"You're not angry, Hester?" she pleaded. "Indeed, I wonder when we shall see Neil Barton again," she went on with bended head.

There was no answer, and Polly made a perilous advance.

"Perhaps we shall see him to-night," she said sweetly, looking up from under her long dark

lashes. She was bewitchingly pretty, and her scarlet bodice and black petticoat were most becoming to the dark waving masses of her hair.

"I do not think so," said Hester. "Why should he come?"

"Why should he not?" cried Polly saucily.

Hester fell to polishing pewter, parrying meanwhile Polly's gay thrusts of girlish mischief, or returning them in kind. Before their task was done Ezra Robinson rode up, and entered presently, moody and disinclined to speak. Hester's merriment and Polly's rippling laugh ceased instantly; they gazed at him, disturbed and sobered by his sombre mood, for he looked before him, frowning, seeing nothing of the quaint, low room, or the two fair faces.

He had reached the cross-roads. Which way should he take?

CHAPTER II

OUT OF THE STORM

THE afternoon did not fulfil the promise of the morning. Hester, having come to a pause in her work, stood in the front doorway looking over the valley, where the dark clouds were gathering fast, and knew that the storm was not far distant. She turned back into the hall, where a murmur of voices floated down the stairway, one voice noticeably louder than the rest, and went quickly back to the sitting-room, to resume her spinning. Yet the thread would slacken between her fingers, and once again she paused, and with her hand resting idly on the wheel sat thinking of Polly's words of the morning.

It was not later than six o'clock, yet the night had fallen. The storm was dashing against the house with ever-increasing force, and the beat of the raindrops on the roof was like the trampling of a hundred horses. Through the small, many-paned windows the lightning made bright bridges into the room, till Hester drew together the heavy wooden shutters.

Supper over, the family seated themselves in a corner of the great kitchen, variously occupied. Hester busily wound flax, while Polly bent over an unfinished quilt. Mrs. Robinson, a trim fair woman of forty-six, with a sweet low voice, was at her spinning-wheel. Miss Jane Robinson, "Aunt Jane," tall and gaunt of figure, and loud of voice, with a disposition to spend her time in her brother Ezra's household, nervously directing its affairs, rather than stay at home in her own comfortable house at Arlington, knitted industriously with flying fingers. The continuous beating of the storm outside mingled with the hum of spinning-wheel and sizzling of fire-logs to make a monotone as unbroken as a silence.

In the midst of this quiet and warmth a loud knock at the house door had an effect abrupt and sudden. Mrs. Robinson's wheel ceased to hum. For an instant no one moved.

"Is it Ezra?" asked Miss Jane in a startled whisper.

Who else would come to this lonely house on the hill on such a night, was the unspoken question of all four women. But Mrs. Robinson, her eyes fixed on the door, rose, and pushed back her chair.

"Ezra is not coming home to-night," she said. "He went to Bennington. Did I not tell you all?"

"Hester, go to the door," cried Miss Jane, retreating toward the sitting-room in sudden panic, closely followed by Polly. Only from time to time they ventured out to see what went on.

Hester crossed the room, and drawing the bolt of the door lifted the iron latch. The wind flung the door open, and a torrent of rain swept into the room. At the same instant a vivid lightning-flash for the space of a second illumined everything, and Hester saw a man standing just outside the threshold.

In the momentary fear that leaped to her heart she took a step backward, then paused with eyes fixed on the intruder.

"Do not fear, mam'selle," said a singularly soft voice. "I come for no harm. Will you grant that I may enter and rest for a few moments? It is to Bennington that I go, to-night."

The stranger's dark skin and straight black hair showed Indian blood. His suit of fringed buckskin was torn and stained, and he was dripping from head to foot, but he held his tall figure proudly erect. He waited impatiently for Hester's answer, his wild dark eyes fixed meaningly upon her face.

She roused herself from her wonder.

"You are welcome to enter," she said quickly, and as another flash revealed the distant forest. "What a night it is!" she cried with a little start.

The young Indian entered, closing the door behind him. There was a shriek from Miss Jane.

“What are you doing, Hester?” she cried. “Heaven protect us! We shall all be murdered!” and she fled again into the sitting-room, loudly slamming the door behind her.

Polly lingered among the darkest shadows of the kitchen, uncertain whether to retreat or stand her ground.

Hester turned to the young half-breed. “Sit down there, and rest,” she said gently, pointing to a great oaken settle by the fire. And as he obeyed her, “I will get you some food,” she added quickly.

Mrs. Robinson gave a lukewarm assent to the young Indian’s presence, while her daughter vanished into the pantry in search of something eatable for the wayfarer. He partook of Hester’s bounty thankfully, telling his story as he gulped down portions of a cold meat pie washed with a hastily decocted apple toddy. Hester listened with wondering eyes and beating heart.

Ten minutes later she retired to join the others in the sitting-room, undaunted by the prospect of an outbreak of disapproval from Aunt Jane.

“Hester Robinson, are you mad?” cried her aunt. “How do you know that he won’t murder and rob us all?”

"But he's not a scalping savage," retorted Hester. "He's partly white, and I can tell by his face he won't hurt us. We couldn't turn him out into the storm tired and hungry, could we? And he brings such news, too. He comes all the way from St. John's, and he says Burgoyne's army is marching up the lake. He left Ticonderoga yesterday morning, and saw General St. Clair there. He rode by way of Hubbardton, warning the people of the enemy's approach. Seven thousand men and four hundred Indians to overrun the Grants and subdue us!" she ended with breathless scorn, cheeks crimson, and eyes sparkling with excitement. "If only I were a man, to go and fight them!"

Polly's spirit caught flame too. Springing up, she flung her arms round her cousin's neck, exclaiming:

"Oh, how brave you are, Hester! Do go on! What more did he say?"

"His name is Cochise, and he is so grateful because I gave him food. He keeps saying over and over again, 'Mam'selle, you are very kind.' Oh, I know he won't——"

"Hester," said her aunt, "you must start this instant, and find out some more. Here it is nine o'clock," and she paused with lifted hand, as the tall clock on the hall-stairs began to strike—"and he may go off soon."

Hester returned gladly to the kitchen. The young half-breed was standing by the hearth, looking down at the burning logs. At the sound of her step he turned, and his dark eyes met hers with deep gratitude. Unwilling to speak, Hester stood silent, and for a moment there was no sound save the snapping flames. Surely the fire never shone upon a stranger sight—the young half-breed, his dark features softened, and the fair girl, in her blue homespun gown, her brown curls falling over her neck and white kerchief, her grey eyes wandering restlessly.

At length the Indian took his musket and powder-horn, and strode to the outer door. Then he turned to Hester.

“The storm has left the valley. The hours go fast. The horse is strong again. They who sleep yonder must waken.” He pointed in the direction of Bennington. “Mam’selle, I will never forget. When you need me, I will come.”

And before the girl could speak or move he was gone like a shadow.

Hester ran to the door and leaned out into the night. The swift summer storm had passed, and the young moon was sailing above the western woods. The broken clouds were drifting off toward the hills. A light shone out to the eastward, where the village lay; and the faint beat of

a horse's hoofs came back on the wind. In ten minutes they would know in Bennington yonder that hills were not barriers enough; for over and around them marched an army to storm the northern gate.

CHAPTER III

NATHAN BENNETT

JUNE of 1777 was the loveliest month of that long-remembered summer. The air was sweet and warm, and heavy with the scent of wayside clover and red wild-strawberries. The corn grew tall and thick. Wild roses bloomed in every pasture; bluebells and buttercups in every wood. Every winding wood-road was a paradise of summer's making; a wild-bower of fairy sights and perfumes. The green bowl of the valley was filled to its rim of purple hills with the rich summer.

Yet while Nature was at her loveliest, human hearts beat with restless anxiety; and men were swayed by strife and passion. In that beautiful territory newly named Vermont all thoughts were turned in the one direction; all hearts feared the approaching crisis. Five months earlier the Congress of the so-called Hampshire Grants had declared their little commonwealth independent, and had petitioned the thirteen sister Colonies that this new State might be received into their number, to unite with them against a common foe. The re-

quest was denied, and the new-born State stood alone. Fully capable of independence, strong, warlike, defiant, peopled by men in whose veins ran Puritan blood; in whose breasts the war-spirit never slumbered, the miniature republic faced the foe. In the border-town of Bennington the flame of excitement burned high; and scarcely a day passed without the arrival of some wild rumour at the lonely Robinson farm.

On a bright morning about the middle of June Hester came down the steps of her porch, dressed for a ride, wearing a wide-brimmed hat tied with a ribbon under her chin, and holding up the skirt of her dark-blue riding habit. Her father was already in the saddle of his brown mare; and Hester quickly mounted "Ticonderoga," a handsome black horse with one white foot, commonly known as "Ti," and famed throughout the neighbourhood for his speed and sagacity. Polly waved farewell from the window as they started, letting their horses walk down the hill. Before the foot of the descent was reached the road entered the woods, and their way was shadowed by the boughs of the maple, beech, and hemlock, and bordered by waving alders and tangled undergrowth. For more than a mile they rode along the forest archway, till, at the summit of a hill the forest ended, and they found themselves on a high ridge, sloping to the north, with the matchless reach of the Wal-

loomsac valley on every side. Eastward, the long dark range of mountains, blue with changing shadows; northward, the rolling meadows, fair with every tint of green; peaceful farms, slopes golden with grain; westward, Mount Anthony, emerald against the blue; and southward, the town founded by Benning Wentworth; the Bennington of Stark and Ethan Allen. On this rising ground stood the two brick storehouses that contained the supplies and ammunition for the Continental cause. No one could have predicted that summer morning a century and more ago that this green and peaceful hill-top would decide the destiny of an army.

Leaving the store-houses behind them, Hester and her father turned their horses southward, down the long street which formed the principal part of the town.

At the foot of a hill deeply shaded by flowering locusts the smoke of the Catamount Tavern rose skyward above the trees. In front of this famous inn stood a tall pole surmounted by a stuffed catamount, facing westward, and showing its angry teeth in ominous welcome to the Yorkers. The building itself, set back from the street, was long and low, its unpainted timbers so darkly weather-stained that it looked a century old. All its doors and windows stood wide open to admit the sweet air and the warm June sunshine.

Hester threw a wistful glance in the direction of the tavern as they passed.

"Will you not stop for a moment, father?" she pleaded rather timidly.

Ezra Robinson made an impatient gesture.

"How many times have I told you, Hester, that I will never willingly enter the home of Stephen Fay?"

Beneath the shadow of her hat Hester's face was very sober.

"I'm sorry to anger you, father, but mother told me not to return without seeing Uncle Stephen," she answered softly.

"What is troubling her now?" exclaimed her father sharply, with brows closely contracted, an expression habitual to him of late. Then without waiting for her to answer, he went on fiercely: "But go you shall not, while you're with me. There are other times in plenty to visit the Tavern."

He urged his mare to a canter, and Hester being compelled to follow, discussion of the subject was impossible.

Riding past the wooden meeting-house, whose grassy little churchyard was soon to hold still more sacred memories, Ezra Robinson checked his horse in front of a house somewhat larger than its neighbours, and swinging himself out of the saddle, prepared to help Hester dismount. The

girl was hesitating, when a woman appeared in the open door-way.

"Is that you, Mr. Robinson? And Hester too! Fasten the horses and come in. Neil will be here in a few minutes. He just went over to the Tavern to see if there were any news."

Hester followed her father up the path bordered with flowering honeysuckles to where Mrs. Barton was awaiting them in the wide hall. She led the way to the parlour, a large, square room, delightfully cool and dark after the heat out-of-doors. Here Ezra and Mrs. Barton discussed the possibility of Burgoyne's success—the one subject of speculation and conversation since the Indian Cochise had brought the news. Hester sat and listened, absorbed. Her father's words seemed wisdom to her, because he could see the chances of either side; yet her patriotism chafed under the restraint of a conservative opinion that could not see undoubted glory and success in self-defence for the Grants.

Presently there was a sound of footsteps in the hall, and directly a tall young man of twenty-four or twenty-five entered the room. He had an eager bright face and he held his fair head high.

"Dear Neil, you have come. See who have arrived to visit us. Was I not fortunate to keep them?" said his mother.

Neil could scarcely restrain his delight as he shook hands with Mr. Robinson and his daughter.

"I'm so glad you've come just now," he said, smiling at Hester. "We want to have a dance at the Tavern, and I was talking to Captain Fay about it. He thinks we might have it within the next two weeks."

He seated himself on the sofa near Hester's high-backed chair, and gazed at her with admiring eyes.

"You will go with me, won't you, Hester?" he went on rapidly. "Mark Ellis will take Polly, and we shall have a fine time."

Hester was leaning back in her chair, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes resting on the old cabinet in the corner, but at Neil's last words she turned and faced him.

"Do you think we should dance now," she said softly, "when everyone is anxious, and from hour to hour we know not what will happen? Not that I should not like it, for I ever love dancing, but I think praying would fit the time better. If we could but dance to celebrate Burgoyne's defeat, when old Fort Ti is safe, then our hearts would be as light as our feet."

Her eyes shone softly and her colour deepened. Neil began to laugh.

"My dear Hester, your 'old Fort Ti' is as safe as Gibraltar, come who will. Fret not yourself

for that. But tell me that I may take you, Hester," he added pleadingly, leaning forward with eyes fixed upon her face.

For a moment she hesitated, then her youth and her love of enjoyment conquered, and she answered slowly: "I suppose 'twill not hurt for the once."

Neil, delighted, gave her no chance to say more. "'Tis all arranged then," he cried. "And I will ride up and tell you, the instant I know when 'tis to be."

Mrs. Barton now announced that dinner was ready, and they all went out into the quaint, dark dining-room where the finest of Mrs. Barton's silver and china were spread on the oaken table.

After the generous meal was over Neil and Hester wandered out into the garden and talked of many things: the great war and the approaching crisis; the village happenings and the people they both knew.

"You will soon recognise Bennington no longer, Hester," burst out Neil at last, "so greatly will it be changed for the better, now that Nathan Bennett is come to town."

There was scorn in his voice and scorn in the curl of his lip.

"Nathan Bennett?" queried Hester, with a look of interest, "who is he?"

"Oh, he is doubtless a prince, or of kin to princes," returned Neil contemptuously. "No

one knows who he is or where he came from, but he has arrived suddenly and taken a high place in the affairs of this favoured town. You'd think by his cool authority that he was General Washington himself. He comes from Salem, I've heard it said. But *I* think there's something wrong with a man who dares not tell right out the place he comes from or the story of his past."

Hester said nothing, but the spirit of perversity rose within her. She would have given much to know some good about the stranger, if only to tease Neil by repeating it.

"All that I have against Captain Fay, is that he favours this upstart," added Neil, his irritation increasing.

Hester's impatience grew apace. They emerged now from the shade of the orchard and her eyes sought the sky. She exclaimed suddenly:

"Why, 'tis getting late. See! the sun has nearly reached Mount Anthony. Father and I must start at once."

She turned quickly toward the house, Neil following.

Ten minutes later the three were riding up the village street, Neil declaring that he also had an errand to discharge. While they were yet some little distance from the Tavern a horseman rode up to it, and, dismounting, walked up the path to the house.

They were near enough to notice the erect bearing of his tall figure and a soldierly swing in his step.

"That is Nathan Bennett," muttered Neil, with lips tight-pressed.

Hester's eyes were following the stranger with interest.

"He has a fine figure, has he not?" she said approvingly.

"Oh, yes, he is sufficiently handsome," began Neil bitterly; then paused, in disapproval too deep for words. Hester carelessly flecked Ti's mane with her riding-whip. She was very weary of Neil's criticism, and only too glad when they reached the crossroads where his way parted from theirs. Her spirits rose at his departure, and she chattered gaily to her father as they turned their horses into the lonely valley-road.

In the woods it was almost dusk, and the trampling of hoofs on the soft road was the only sound, until, when they reached the place where the road from Arlington joined theirs, Ezra Robinson raised his head with an eager start. A horse and rider were approaching, and an instant later Mark Ellis drew rein by his side.

"Well met, Mr. Robinson! And Miss Hester. What good fortune is mine!"

Removing his three-cornered hat, he bent low his brown head, then raising Hester's free hand he

touched it with his lips in knightly fashion. He was handsome, after a reckless type and fashion. Something about him suggested Nathan Bennett, whom Hester had observed well entering the Tavern, yet his whole bearing and manner at the same time suggested a totally differing personality—with something in it too that was not pleasant to Hester. She tried to smile, but instead bit her lip, the rich colour flooding her face. Ellis seemed to enjoy her confusion, and wheeling his horse, rode by her side, handsome and nonchalant. Hester's gay spirits all deserted her, and seeing that his efforts to make her talk were unsuccessful, Ellis turned to Ezra Robinson, saying carelessly, “I suppose if Ticonderoga falls—which may the fates avert—that many a man who knew not which became him better, the king's scarlet or patriot buff-and-blue, will show himself in his true colour.” He laughed, then added: “'Tis all very fine for me,—I know which side to cling to,—to talk thus, but for the man who's uncertain 'tis not so pleasant 'twixt royal fire and colonial frying-pan.”

His look met Ezra's: the one all recklessness, the other uncertainty and fear. At that moment, while the two gazed at each other, Ellis became conscious that Hester was looking at him, with eyes that wondered and questioned. He felt his heart leap. Did she suspect a secret? The next instant he was smiling into her face, and she turned

away. All that evening he watched her closely, trying to learn if it were only chance that had caused that sudden look, or a swift thought born of intuition. And all that evening Hester seemed to him again gayer and more restless than her wont, as if she sought to lay the ghost of his suspicion.

For the next three days Hester's thoughts constantly recurred to the subject of Nathan Bennett, who he was in reality, and what his history, and her interest grew in proportion as curiosity gave it reason.

She had not long to wait, however, for one afternoon not long after came a desired opportunity. At three o'clock Aunt Jane departed for Arlington, and after watching the horse and chaise out of sight Hester with an unwonted sense of freedom stole into the garden to pluck a spray of mignonette before returning to her work. The heat of the day was past, and a soft breeze stirring tempted her to remain out-of-doors. She thought longingly of the vine-shaded porch where she might sit and dream a while, and strolled around the house, her hands clasped in front of her, her eyes fixed on the ground.

Suddenly she realised with a start that but a few feet away from her stood a young man; one hand holding his hat, and the other resting on the bridle-rein of his grey horse. Hester recognised him at once as Nathan Bennett. He advanced, and ob-

serving the swift colour in her face, spoke at once, as if to set her at ease.

"You are Miss Hester Robinson, are you not?" he asked.

She answered him, smiling. "Yes, I am Hester Robinson."

"I am Nathan Bennett. I have come seeking Mr. Robinson. I wished to consult with him on matters of military importance, and they told me in the village that he would gladly lend me his experience."

"Will you not come into the house? I will speak to my father at once."

A few minutes later Hester was climbing the stairs to the room where Ezra Robinson spent most of his time when in the house. She knocked at the door, and, her father answering, she opened it and entered. He sat near a table strewn with maps and papers, and looked up, sharply impatient of interruption. Then seeing his daughter, his face relaxed, and he asked not urgently:

"Well, Hester, what is it?"

Hester explained the stranger's errand.

"Well, well, I suppose I must see him," her father said sternly. "I will come in a moment."

Hester returned to the parlour, where in her father's great arm-chair Nathan Bennett sat. He spoke but little, and now and again came a silence in which he seemed to fall into deep mus-

ing. Contrary to the fashion of the day his dark hair was not worn in queue, but was tied by a black ribbon. His eyes were large and very dark. If they were mirrors of his soul, then somewhere in their depths lay a troubled secret. The fine forehead, the rich clear colour, the firm, proud mouth in strange contrast to the mournful eyes, gave his face strength and charm. Hester studied it shyly as the minutes went by, wondering if some of the heroes of her treasured books had not looked like this man.

Nathan Bennett put aside the thoughts that shadowed him, and spoke:

“ This is a beautiful valley of yours. A place where one might live as men lived long ago, in happiness and peace. Here there should be sunshine always;” and he turned to the open window. His gaze came back to the girl’s face, and the dark and the grey eyes met.

Then, turning suddenly, he sprang up and held out his hand to Ezra Robinson, saying:

“ You came so softly, sir, we did not hear you. I am loath to take your time, but I come on a mission of importance.”

Slowly and dreamily Hester went away to her neglected work. She felt the glad wild thrill of youth and happiness. All the joy of living; the wealth of the long, sweet summer possessed her. All the old fair fancies made music in her soul.

CHAPTER IV

A NIGHT OF PEACE AND WAR

FOR all her dreams and fancies Hester was far from impractical. A girl of New England in the stormy years of the eighteenth century, she was a child of the north and of the Puritans. Her eyes had opened to the light in the terrible French War, when her father had been far from home, fighting with his fellow-colonists beneath the English flag. It was then that Polly's father, gallant Richard Fay, had met his death. His young wife, crushed by the blow, died in the hour of Polly's birth, and the child thus left an orphan was taken in by Mrs. Robinson as her own. The two girls loved each other dearly, and for fourteen years no home could have been more peaceful.

Though with the Revolution came heartache and anxiety for absent kinsfolk and friends, the first two years of the conflict brought only the tidings of war to Bennington, and no cannon were heard within echo of the calm Walloomsac. But in the early spring of '77 the waves of war began to roll nearer.

It was then that Mark Ellis had appeared, an American scout, he said, and so his papers seemed to show, in Schuyler's army. He had been sent northward to Ticonderoga and on his return had stopped at Bennington. He was received with great favour by the younger folk; the girls admiring him for his gallantry, the men for his ready wit and knowledge of the world beyond their hills, despite the fact that older people looked askance at his free manners and fliprant speech. He was a gay participant in all the village merry-makings, and the leader of the group of young men who met each evening at the Catamount Tavern. Indeed, their revels in this famous inn came to great proportions, for one night, when the mugs of hot flip had circulated more generously than usual, a quarrel arose between Ellis and a reckless village youth, and in a flash coats were off and swords drawn. In the midst of the duel Captain Fay, drawn thither by the tumult, burst into the room, and stared in astonishment at the stormy scene which he had interrupted. With a stern face he ordered Ellis never again to set foot inside the Catamount Tavern, and severely rebuking the others, dismissed the company.

Ellis had made a similarly varied impression upon the different members of the Robinson household. Ezra Robinson welcomed him at

once, and despite the difference in their years they became fast friends. Ellis' handsome face and gay manner could not fail to attract the vivacious Polly; nor could he himself remain unconscious of her beauty and charm.

So matters stood on that June day of Nathan Bennett's first visit to the Robinson house. He came often during the next two weeks, but Hester saw him little, for her father usually met him at the door, and the two spent the most of the time in close conversation in the room upstairs. It was on a morning early in July that Nathan Bennett, having taken leave of his host, found Hester standing between the tall poplars at the front gate. With her hand above her eyes she was gazing across the fields, but she turned at the sound of his step on the path.

"I was trying to discover if that were Cochise," she said, pointing to a horseman far away across the meadow. "He is an Indian scout, who has been of much use to my father and most good to us," she added in explanation.

For a moment Nathan Bennett stood stroking the mane of his grey horse. "I go northward to-day with a message for Colonel Warner at Ticonderoga," he said slowly. "Before I go, I wish to thank you for your kindness."

Hester looked at him in surprise.

"But I have done nothing," she said simply.

“ You have done much. You have made me welcome in your home.” He paused, then went on, in a voice low and earnest, “ I am going to tell you a strange foreboding of mine: Fort Ticonderoga will fall; I have felt it all the while.” Then, impatient at his despairing mood, he put out his hand, saying: “ This is not the way to repay your kindness by filling your thoughts with sadness. I see always the shadows.”

She was standing in the sunshine of which she seemed a part.

“ Why do you look at the shadows? ” she said, and her sweet voice thrilled him. “ There is hope always.”

He looked into her radiant face and his dark eyes caught the light.

“ I will remember that,” he answered. “ There is hope always.”

He mounted his horse and slowly rode away. Hester still stood in the sunshine, but for a moment its brightness had left her face.

The distant rider was not Cochise, but Neil Barton. He now cantered up with a gay “ good-morning,” and tied his horse to the mounting-block.

“ Fortune favours us,” he cried. “ Captain Fay says we may dance at the Tavern Tuesday night. Mark Ellis has gone southward, but he will return in time, and he bade me tell the fair

Polly that he begs leave to be her escort for the evening, in spite of Captain Fay."

At this moment Polly herself came running to the gate.

"Well met, Master Neil," she cried, making him a mock curtsey. "What fine news have you brought us?"

Neil repeated his message. Polly pouted saucily.

"Pray tell Captain Ellis, if you see him first, that he need not fret himself for my welfare. Mr. Tichenor will take me."

It was a fashion of Polly's to pretend that she cared nothing for Mark Ellis. Hester only wished that it were the truth instead of pretence.

"Charm no more unfortunate men, dear Polly," cried Hester, laughing.

"I am not the only fair maid who does that," flashed back Polly with a mischievous glance at Neil. "But I hear Aunt Charlotte calling. Do not fail to deliver my message." And she flew to the house, with a flutter of scarlet petticoat and a flash of shoe-buckles.

On the evening of the dance Hester and her mother made one of their rare visits to the attic,—a long low room with sloping roof and tiny windows beneath the eaves. Mrs. Robinson set her candle down near an oaken chest in a far corner; and taking a key from the breast of her

gown, began to unlock it. From under the raised lid an odour of lavender stole out. Mrs. Robinson drew gently forth a gown of so rich a lustre that Hester's breath came quick with girlish pleasure. The dress was of silk brocade, a shade deeper than sky-blue, with forget-me-nots sprinkled over it. The gauzy kerchief was of the same colour and, like the dress, embroidered with flowers. From another corner of the chest Mrs. Robinson undid a pair of dainty high-heeled satin slippers with crystal buckles that caught the light like diamonds. Hester gave a little cry of delight.

“Am I really to wear these, mother?”

“Your grandmother wore them on her wedding-day; the dress was her wedding-gown, and you shall wear them to-night,” Mrs. Robinson answered.

Hester disappeared downstairs with her burden of silken finery, and Mrs. Robinson knelt beside another chest, of dark, time-stained wood. When the lid was opened the light shone on folds of crimson and white, and she paused, letting the dress slip from between her clasped fingers, and gazed with wide eyes into the shadows.

“Twenty years,” she murmured, “twenty years. And it seems but yesterday that she wore it.”

Hester's quaint Colonial bedroom never looked upon a fairer sight than on the evening of the

party. The dark furniture, the gilt-framed oblong mirror, the great white-curtained bed; the high-backed chairs laden with dainty finery, were all mellowed by the light of the candles burning in the sconces. Hester's gold-lighted brown curls were gathered to the top of her head and held in place by a tall silver comb, matching the silvery-blue of her gown. Her hair was powdered, but so lightly that its natural colour was not obscured. Her dress, with its pointed bodice, embroidered overskirt, and close fitting elbow sleeves with their fall of rich lace over the white roundness of her arms, seemed to have gathered up the light of all the candles that ever had shone upon it, to grace this night.

In the gown that had been her mother's Polly was a maid of olden France. The petticoat was of white silk, the overskirt and bodice were crimson and she wore high-heeled crimson slippers with glistening gold buckles. At her white throat was a necklace of scarlet coral, and a coral comb held her black unpowdered locks.

By the time the girls had tripped into the parlour Mark Ellis appeared. He wore breeches and coat of dark blue velvet, and a richly embroidered waistcoat with ruffles of silvery lace at neck and wrist. Both knee and shoe buckles were of silver. His brown hair was powdered to a grey, an effect which gave added beauty to his spirited

face. Polly gave a little cry of pleasure and ran toward him, but Hester advanced with hesitation. Despite her inherent dislike for him she could not help being impressed with his fine appearance, and Ellis was not slow to note her admiration. His blue eyes shone with pleasure.

"Surely man was never yet dazzled by such visions!" he cried with a low bow. "What a gay little mocking-bird you are, Polly! Will you grant me a minuet, fair Hester?"

For a moment Hester wavered; but only for a moment, for her spirits, which had fallen beneath the words of Nathan Bennett, had risen high again, and all her young soul was longing for enjoyment. Why should she not dance with Captain Ellis?

To be sure she had never like him, but she had no definite reason for her dislike. Nothing should spoil the evening's pleasure.

Neil Barton soon arrived. He wore brown velvet, but was clad far more simply than Ellis. He regarded his more elegant companion with a look of involuntary admiration and assumed indifference.

The road being only wide enough for two abreast, Polly and Captain Ellis led the way through the warm dusk of the woods; gay snatches of their talk and laughter floating back to Hester and Neil, who followed.

The Catamount Tavern, with its many small-paned windows, shone from among the trees like so many squares of brilliant light. The front door was open and from it to the street stretched a glowing pathway. As Hester and Polly crossed the threshold Stephen Fay came to meet them, a figure past the prime of life but still active and stalwart. Of great integrity, and unbounded patriotism, he was a man revered by all his townsmen, who loved the sight of his rugged face, kind eyes, and silvery hair. It was owing to Polly's pleading that Captain Fay had so far yielded as to allow Mark Ellis' presence on this occasion. He now greeted the girls warmly, smoothing Polly's cheek, and giving Hester's hand a caressing pat. Mrs. Robinson was his favourite sister, and Richard Fay, his beloved young brother, had been to him as a son. He petted both the girls; Hester he almost worshipped.

The long low room, so soon to be famed as Council Chamber, was the background of a brilliant scene. The wooden floor was polished and carefully waxed. Dark boughs of the pine and balsam hid the rough walls and sent forth a deep and pleasing odour, while the blaze of many candles lit the picture. Over the fire-place was a wide mantel with the words "Counsil Room" cut into the marble. Above the door leading to the hall was looped the pine-tree flag of Massachusetts;

at the opposite end sat the musicians busily tuning their violins. The room was already half-filled with the "fair women and brave men" of that vanished century. There were David and Jonathan Robinson, brothers of Colonel Moses Robinson, whose regiment was even then at the fort on Lake Champlain; there was handsome Isaac Tichenor, then but twenty-three, who had come to Bennington less than a month before, and was admired by all the girls of the town—did he dream that he should yet be Governor of his adopted State?—Dr. Jonas Fay, the Captain's son, soon to be a member of the Vermont Council of Safety, whose meetings were held in this same room under far different conditions; Eldad Dewey, the parson's son; while near by, his sisters, Margit and Betsey, laughed and chattered; Elijah Dewey, his elder brother, who kept the tavern near the church and would bear a part in a battle not far distant; Joseph Fay, who was later Secretary of the State and the associate of Ira Allen in the famous negotiations with England; Adjutant Walbridge, who had fought at Quebec, and was yet to fight in a battle nearer home, and his brother, Henry, whose life went out a month later on the steep banks of the Walloomsac.

All of these and many more had gathered at the old tavern for an evening's merry-making. The women were the fair maids of Bennington and a

few from the neighbouring villages. Hetty Baker, Lucy Brownson, and Betty Gray had ridden over from Arlington. Hetty and Lucy were fair, but Betty Gray was dark, and held high her coquettish head, proud of her yellow satin.

At last the violins began a merry strain; and the leader of the musicians rose to announce that the dance would open with money musk. For a moment there was a lull, then an outburst of chatter, a rustle of fans and a swish of silken skirts as partners were chosen. Hester and Neil, Polly and Mark Ellis, Betty Gray and Isaac Tichenor took their places and the rest followed. With a click of high-heeled shoes on the bare floor; graceful curtseys and the gay melody of the music, the dance began. Hester could not help wishing that it were Nathan Bennett instead of Neil that stood beside her.

Betty Gray's mischievous dark eyes were fixed upon Captain Ellis, and whenever he turned in her direction she bestowed upon him a coquettish smile. Polly's pretty face clouded. As soon as an opportunity offered itself:

“Is she not spiteful?” she whispered to Hester, who returned an indignant, “Do not mind her!”

When the dance had ended they wandered out in groups into the hall to drink cooling punch from Captain Fay's horn goblets.

Hester danced the Virginia reel with her cousin, David Fay, a handsome lad, barely sixteen, and afterwards strayed into the orchard with him to walk beneath the trees.

"I wish I were older," said David. "If the war comes I *must* fight, and father thinks me too young to carry a musket."

The moonlight fell on his eager boyish face. Hester sighed.

"Just think, David, *I* am almost twenty, and *I* can't fight. It's so unfortunate to be a girl. What use are women in war-time!"

Meantime within doors a group of young men were eagerly discussing the possibilities of raising troops at Bennington in the event of a near attack. Dr. Fay had spoken encouragingly of the fine body of men that would rally at time of need, when Mark Ellis made a contradictory remark and the excitement rose high. Tongues and tempers were waxing hot, and the other debaters stopped to listen, leaving the two principal speakers to argue out the matter for themselves.

"I think you will confess, Captain Ellis," said Dr. Fay, striving to speak with gravity, "that although, as you say, our men are not trained soldiers, they won in a fair fight at Concord and Trenton against the skilled warriors of Britain."

"Oh, at Trenton we fought Hessians, not English grenadiers," said Ellis. "And at Con-

cord the British were unaccustomed to our mode of warfare. 'Tis not that I underrate our power, for Washington's army is strong by experience, but how can we expect the untrained countrymen of this vicinity to meet Burgoyne's veterans successfully?"

"Your words savour not of patriotism," interrupted Isaac Tichenor.

"Faith, man, do you think me a Tory because I am sane?" cried Ellis.

Isaac Tichenor's fine face was flushed with wrath. "What you say is untrue!" he blazed out. "I'll wager the men of the Grants against any British army!"

A fiercer quarrel than differences of opinion, common to the times, generally led to, was averted by the minuet. Mark Ellis went in search of Hester, Isaac Tichenor of Polly, while Neil took Hetty Baker, and Dr. Fay engaged the lively Betty. The listening group fell back, or sought partners. To the sound of the sweet slow music back and forth the dancers went, in stately grace. Even in that distinguished company Hester and Mark Ellis, who danced together, were noticeable. The high-bred nonchalance of Ellis's face seemed to intensify the winning sweetness of hers; while his courtly bearing, combined with her natural grace, made them the handsomest couple that trod the measure. Even Hester felt a certain pleasure

at the frank courtesy and gay speech of her partner. The merry occupants of the room seemed to move in a mist of soft radiance from the candles, with no thought but for the rhythm of their steps.

But suddenly music and dance together were interrupted. There was a sound of an outer door flung open, and Captain Fay rushed into the room, suppressed excitement upon his face. The music of the violins ceased; all steps were stilled and all eyes turned in his direction. Some of the dancers left their places and crowded toward him, drawn by the look on his face.

“An Indian scout has just come in with news.”

The words came clear as a bell.

“Ticonderoga has fallen; evacuated by St. Clair before dawn of the 6th. Yesterday morning our men fought the British at Hubbardton and were defeated. Warner’s regiment is retreating. Burgoyne is marching southward.”

A low cry burst from all; a cry of incredulity and horror. Then came despairing silence, broken by a girl’s voice, clear and full of hope.

“The Grants will not surrender! They have not conquered *us*!”

The voice was Hester Robinson’s. A low cheer ran through the room; some of the men held up their right hands.

“Amen!” they cried.

The colour rushed into Hester’s face. She had

spoken with a leap of courage, but now her eyes sought the ground shyly. To cover her confusion she turned to Captain Fay:

“Oh, Uncle Stephen, where is the messenger?” she cried.

“I left him standing just outside the door,” he answered.

“Let us go and speak with him,” said Hester, gathering up her skirts.

She ran from the room and through the hall, followed by Polly and Neil. At the outer doorway she paused, surprised. There in the moonlight stood Cochise; motionless as a figure moulded in bronze, his dark face upturned to hers.

“You have come from Ticonderoga, Cochise? Were you there when our men marched out?”

“Mam’selle, I will tell you,” and the words, slow and passionless, were yet fraught with meaning. “Three days ago I was at the fort of the roaring water. It is the last day of the week; when we awake, on the great hill toward the setting sun, there are scarlet coats. We know then we cannot stay, so in the night before the dawn we go out *very* quiet and we think no one can hear. But a man, his name I know not, puts a torch to his house. Then there is light and the Briteesh see. They follow, follow, and our men march, march till the sun sets. Then the dark comes and we are glad. But in the morning they are faster

than we, and the bullets are swift. Colonel Francis they kill, and though Colonel Warner shouts, shouts very loud, his men will not listen. The Briteesh are more strong. They take many of us. *I ride on with the news.*"

Hester stood silent. The moonlight falling over her made her face fairer still, and in her glittering silk she looked a princess. The young half-breed raised his eyes, and a look of wonder crept over his face. There was a sound of voices within and she turned back into the hall. The evening had broken up and the dancers were going home. Some of the men remained in hurried consultation and discussion.

It was decided that Neil Barton be sent to Massachusetts for aid, while Cochise bore the news to New Hampshire. The merry-makers, now silent and anxious, dispersed slowly, a changed company indeed. In silence Hester and Polly descended the tavern steps.

When the horses were brought, Cochise stood at Ti's head while Neil helped Hester into the saddle. Polly and Captain Ellis were already mounted. Neil gathered up his bridle-rein.

"I will meet you at the Tavern inside an hour," said he curtly to the Indian.

Then they rode off through the moonlight and Cochise stood and gazed after them till the last sound of the horses' hoofs had died away.

The ride homeward was silent; even Mark Ellis spoke little. Under cover of the darkness he had taken possession of Polly's free hand. When they came in sight of the house Neil turned to the girl at his side.

"There is something I wish to say to you, Hester."

"Must you say it to-night?" faltered Hester, divining what would follow.

"Yes, to-night. You have long known that I loved you."

"Oh, don't let us talk of this now, Neil," she pleaded. "Some other time. Not now."

"But why not now, Hester? You are always postponing."

"I would rather not answer to-night, Neil, I do not wish to anger you, but—oh, I cannot marry you."

"Hester, what mean you?"

For a moment Hester's eyes met his bravely. "I like you, Neil, but I do not love you."

"You don't know your own mind," burst out Neil impatiently. "Are you always going to wait for some dream-lover? Or is there really—"

Hester shook her head, "I love no man," said she clearly and with truth. "But see, we are nearly at our gate; let us talk no more of this." And Neil kept silence.

Ezra Robinson received the news of Ticon-

deroga with the utmost calmness; his face betrayed no sign of the tumult within his soul. Yet his life had reached its turning-point. That night he was to shatter and cast away all the ties of love and loyalty which bound him to the country of his birth. Henceforth that country in her dire need could look to him no more for a patriot's protection.

That same night three men rode on their ways, and in the mind of each was the picture of one face, a girl's face, tender and childlike, with sweet, earnest grey eyes. Neil thought of it as he spurred southward and of the words she had spoken. Surely she had not meant them. She was only a girl in years, and her will would change.

Captain Ellis thought of it, as he rode toward Arlington. Polly's face came too, but the other was more abiding. He was very proud, and it stung him fiercely that here was a girl who refused to admire him, who saw him too clearly to be deceived. But as he mused, his self-confidence came back to him. He had no rival but the inexperienced Neil; the fair Puritan should yet be brought to withdraw her scorn. And he rode on smiling.

Cochise, the Indian, threading his way through the dark hills to the eastward, saw the same fair face. To him it revealed no scorn, only gentleness and compassion, and it seemed to him like an angel's. Above his head shone a star, bright, beautiful, pure of radiance, and immeasurably dis-

tant. Between it and him lay infinite space, yet the star could guide him by its radiance, and fill his soul with its beauty, and he could raise his eyes to it in reverence and awe. To him, she was even as the star.

CHAPTER V

HO! ALL TO THE BORDERS! VERMONTERS, COME DOWN.

THE four weeks following the night of the dance at the Tavern were fraught with excitement. The worst had happened. Ticonderoga had fallen, and Burgoyne's army was advancing along the unprotected frontier. Hundreds of defenceless settlers in the northern part of the Grants left their fields unharvested and their dwellings tenantless, and loading their wagons with all they could carry, took their wives and children and fled southward.

By the 15th of July Bennington was a scene of confusion. Horsemen with messages clattered along the once quiet street, and Mrs. Robinson and the girls repeatedly left their work to hear news from the scouts on their way to the village. It was very hard to sit quietly at wheel or quilting-frame when the very air was pulsating with a mad thrill of days to come.

Within a week after the fight at Hubbardton Nathan Bennett returned. He was pale with fatigue, though he held his head as proudly as ever. But when Hester led him to the parlour, as

she had done on the day of his first coming, the sad lines left his face, and his eyes held only happiness. She had too much sunshine in her nature not to impart it to others.

He found an eager listener in the girl, and to her he poured out the story of Warner's brave defence, dwelling particularly on the fine marksmanship of the Green Mountain Boys. The two were forgetful of the flight of time, till Mrs. Robinson and Polly appeared, when the tale of Hubbardton fight must needs be retold to them too. It was not till the afternoon was beginning to lengthen that Nathan Bennett discovered it was time for him to return to the village, and reluctantly took his leave.

He rode slowly homeward, in higher spirits than he had been for years. He even hummed the gay fragment of a love-song as his horse made its way through the forest; and having no sympathetic companion in whom to confide, he fell to communing with himself.

“I feel as if a spell had been cast upon me,” ran his thoughts, “as if I had awakened in another world. For three hours I have been utterly happy and without a care. What charm does she use, I wonder, that causes trouble to take wing? 'Tis the power of a sweet nature, and a life that knows no wrong. The light of her soul is in her eyes, a light to guide a troubled heart. For four years I have dwelt in shadows, and now——”

"Faith, man, what are you muttering about?" cried a gay voice, and Nathan Bennett emerged from his happy reverie with a start, conscious for the first time that he had spoken aloud. A few feet in front of him were a horse and rider, and the bright, mocking eyes of Mark Ellis were fixed upon him. Nathan Bennett felt the joy slip out of his soul, leaving only the old ache. His face was sad enough as he spoke.

"What do you here in this neighbourhood? Is there some new mischief to be devised?" With the accusing words on his lips he looked at the other with eyes full of repressed bitterness.

"I might ask the same question of you, Nathan," said Ellis, laughing carelessly. "'Tis odd we should have met in the heart of this wilderness after a separation of—how long a time?"

Nathan Bennett's brows were knit in a troubled frown:

"Are you not in danger here?" he asked slowly.

"Not more than you, I think," retorted the other. "My purpose here is an affair of my own. It may be mischief or it may be a certain fair maid."

With a start, Nathan turned toward the speaker.

"What do you mean?" he cried fiercely, the thought of Hester leaping into his mind.

"Secrets are for keeping, not telling," laughed Ellis coolly. "I think I shall keep mine. But

though our conversation is both pleasant and profitable, I have not the time to prolong it, so I beg leave to continue my journey."

So saying, he put spurs to his horse, and passing his companion, disappeared among the trees. For some moments Nathan sat motionless, lost in musing. Those were painful memories awakened by the voice and bearing of the man who had just quitted him.

Before the end of July Bennington was arming to meet the foe. Colonel Samuel Herrick was raising his regiment of Green Mountain Boys soon to be known as "Herrick's Rangers," and into the town poured men in brown-fringed buckskin or green hunting-shirts, with long muskets across their shoulders and figures that were tall, strong and finely knit.

Partly owing to the favour of Warner and partly to his own ability, Nathan Bennett had been appointed captain in Herrick's Regiment. He spent his days writing orders in his room at the Catamount Tavern or drilling his men for service. Captain Stephen Fay, who had taken a great liking to the young man, sternly denied the assertions of some of the Bennington men that Nathan Bennett had fled to their mountain-town to escape the penalty of some unrighteous deed. Captain Fay repeated his denial to Ira Allen, the young Secretary of the Council, as the two were walking in the

garden behind the Tavern on a hot evening later in July.

“I see not why,” said Captain Fay, “because we know not the man’s past, we must think there’s something wrong in it. Why is it, Ira, that we ever imagine evil more easily than good?”

“You do not, Captain,” said young Allen, smiling at the other’s face. “I never knew a man more just. As to Captain Bennett, whatever he has done in the past, he is making himself of much use to Colonel Herrick in the present.”

“He is greatly to my liking,” said Captain Fay, looking thoughtfully at the lighted “Council-Chamber,” whence candles flashed across the dusky garden. “Quiet and self-possessed, but quick as a panther in time of action, he is a man much needed in the coming crisis.”

Ira Allen did not answer. He was looking off at the dark boundary of western hills. Suddenly a few miles north of Mount Anthony a light flashed out.

“Look! Is not that the Robinson house?” cried Allen, catching his companion’s arm. “What does that mean, Captain?”

Stephen Fay gazed steadily at the distant light, which continued to burn for a moment, then disappeared.

“ ‘Tis doubtless some signal to the scouts,” he suggested briefly.

"Ezra Robinson has given much information to the Council," said Ira Allen, in a lower tone. "But for the past three days we have heard nothing from him. I had meditated sending Captain Bennett up there to-morrow to learn the reason of his silence."

Stephen Fay made no reply.

"Can there be anything wrong, think you, Captain," asked Allen anxiously, lowering his voice to a whisper.

A troubled silence followed. Captain Fay paced the path restlessly, but at length he turned, and putting a hand on his companion's shoulder, began to speak in earnest tones.

"I am loath to say anything on this subject, Ira, for Ezra Robinson is my sister's husband: That I have personal causes for disliking him is no reason that I should speak ill. But in you I have the most perfect confidence, and this much I will say: he is too easily influenced; I say not that he is disloyal; he fought bravely for our cause, and was sorely mistreated by Congress. I am sorry to put suspicion in your mind, but when a nation's at stake, we must needs be cautious. The whole of the subject is this: Err on the side of prudence. I do not know that he is faithless, but I do think he is vacillating."

Stephen Fay had indeed cause to dislike Ezra Robinson; nay, more, to hate him bitterly, had he

been a man to yield to vindictive hatred. Thirteen years before a dispute between them as to the ownership of a certain tract of land had been settled in Stephen Fay's favour; and Ezra Robinson, though knowing the decision just, had vowed vengeance. Ten years passed, however, before vengeance came. One day when the affair had been almost forgotten, Ezra Robinson asked of Stephen Fay the loan of two hundred pounds. Stephen Fay, unsuspecting, complied, but months went by, and there was no sign of the borrowed money. At last in desperation Stephen Fay demanded instant payment, and Ezra Robinson, in vindictive triumph, replied that the money was only just equivalent for the stolen land, and that he would never repay it!

Nathan Bennett received with inward delight the orders of the Council of Safety to ride to the Robinson house to talk with Ezra. It was the 31st of July, and the air was full of the pleasant languor of mid-summer. In the woods not a leaf was stirring and the only sound was the occasional shrill pipe of a locust and the drowsy chirp of a cricket. For two weeks now Nathan had seen almost nothing of Hester, though he had thought of her constantly. He was just beginning to realise how large a place she filled in his life.

Ezra Robinson, sitting beside his paper-strewn table in the room upstairs, listened with interest to the young man's message, and when his visitor

had finished, rose, and going to a small cabinet unlocked it, and took out a paper. Nathan Bennett had risen also and stood regarding the other intently.

"Have the Council decided whether or not Bennington is the object of attack?" asked Ezra Robinson, returning his visitor's direct gaze.

"There is, I believe, a difference of opinion on the subject," returned Nathan Bennett guardedly. "Information as to Burgoyne's plans is as yet too little."

"They who think our store-houses the threatened point are, in my opinion wrong," said the other, with rather more emphasis than Nathan Bennett thought necessary. "Think you Burgoyne, with Albany for his destination, would come so far out of his path?"

"The main army might not come," said Nathan Bennett, hazarding a reply; "a detachment of troops might be sent to attack us."

"From what I have heard from the scouts, I think not," said Ezra Robinson, with a shake of the head.

Nathan listened, with a new notion in his mind as to why the Council wished him to hold converse with Ezra Robinson. He himself had not succeeded in extracting the smallest grain of information from what Ezra had said. Moreover, he surmised that the other had questioned him for the

sole purpose of discovering how far the plans of the British were known to the Council. A suspicion had crept into his mind and refused to be thrust aside. Was the man really loyal? Or could it be that he was in communication with the British and while withholding news of importance from the Council was willing to inform them of minor matters in order to uphold his own integrity?

As he passed the garden a flash of colour caught his eye, and looking up he saw Hester standing among the tall ranks of crimson holly-hocks. All other thoughts took instant flight, and flinging his horse's rein over the garden gate he strode quickly down the path. Hester had been gathering flowers and her hands were full of scarlet geraniums and purple heliotrope, whose colours shone against the grey of her gown.

"I have not forgotten," said Nathan Bennett, after the exchange of greetings, "what you told me of your great love of books."

As he spoke, he drew out a small leather-bound volume, and held it toward her.

Her eyes were wide with childlike pleasure. She touched the book with fingers trembling with eagerness.

"A romance! How kind you are to bring it to me! How shall I ever thank you!"

Her eyes were starry with delight. He thought himself repaid by seeing the joy in her face.

"No thanks are due," he answered, smiling contentedly. "I am sure the book will please you."

"Books are a fairy-land to me," she answered softly, a dreamy look creeping over her face. "I have but to raise the cover of this and slip into paradise." Then her mood changing, "I shall be taking snatches at forbidden fruit," said she with a merry glance. "Aunt Jane is here, and she thinks it a sin to read romances."

At seven o'clock Mark Ellis arrived and went straight to the sitting-room, where Ezra Robinson was writing, for owing to Miss Jane's zeal for cleanliness, the room upstairs was in disorder. The evening slipped quietly away. At nine o'clock Miss Jane announced that it was bed-time and proceeded to put away her work. The hum of voices in the adjacent room was plainly audible, and Ezra Robinson had directed that no one should interrupt him. Miss Jane looked reflectively at Hester.

"'Tis needful that someone stay to arrange the room, for what with the scattering of paper and ink and the sprinkling of snuff, 'twill be in most shocking disorder. You had better remain, Hester, since not less than ten minutes did you waste in the garden this very day."

Hester received the suggestions without dissent, for the thought came to her that here was the

longed-for opportunity to read the treasured book without opposition from Aunt Jane.

“Mind that you be not idle, Hester. There is spinning to be done, and bread to be set. And forget not to wind the clock,” were her aunt’s parting injunctions.

Left alone, Hester drew forth the spinning-wheel, and for ten minutes spun steadily. Then quietly replacing the wheel in its corner, and producing a large wooden bowl, she began to mix the bread for the morning’s baking, accompanying the process by frequent glances at the clock. By the time she had finished the hands pointed to a quarter of ten. With a sigh of relief she tip-toed across the room to the fireplace, where her treasured book was hidden. Her hand rested on the chimney-piece when there came a gentle knock on the outer door and the young half-breed entered. Hester started almost guiltily at the sound of his light footsteps.

“Does M’sieu’ Robinson send for me?” said Cochise in his soft voice.

“Father is within with Captain Ellis,” returned Hester, motioning toward the sitting-room. “It must be a matter of great importance, for they have not ceased to talk since seven o’clock. Doubtless they will soon be done. You may wait if you like, Cochise.”

Taking the book from its hiding-place, she

crossed the room in order to get what light she could from the flickering candles on the dresser. The young half-breed seated himself on the old settle, gazing quietly into the empty fireplace. Occasionally he raised his head and his gaze wandered over the room. Hester, with the book lying open in her lap, had already forgotten her silent companion. It was not till the hall clock struck eleven that she came to herself, realising how swiftly the time had passed. She rose, and thrusting the book into her dress stood listening. The sound of voices had sunk lower, but was still perceptible.

The young Indian rose also and stole to the outer door, his moccasin-shod feet making no sound. With his hand on the latch, he looked out into the darkness. Hester lighted her candle and started from the room, but at the threshold, paused; then as if yielding to some strong impulse, turned and came slowly back. Cochise was standing, as he had stood on that night nearly two months gone, with one hand on the mantel. Hester set the candle down and half-turned towards him. A look of deep perplexity stole over the girlish beauty of her face. She began to speak in a voice barely audible.

“I wish I knew,” she said, “I wish I knew! Is Captain Ellis a man at heart sincere, or is it because I read him wrong that he seems to me

untrue? Is he really loyal to our cause? I like not to be suspicious. Perhaps I ought to trust him. What think you, Cochise?"

A look of surprise came over the Indian's dark face at being thus appealed to for advice.

"Mam'selle Hestér," he answered, "what are the words of an Indian against the words of the young captain? But you ask, and I will tell you. In the woods grow scarlet berries; fair they are to look upon, but when you touch them, there are thorns that will sting and prick. *Le jeune capitaine* is even as they. He is good to look upon, but if you be not careful, he also has the power to hurt and to sting. A panther's coat is smooth and fine, but his claws are very sharp."

His face had taken stern lines; a gleam of hate crept into it.

Hester gazed into the candle-flame a moment, with a troubled look.

"For what you have said, I thank you, Cochise," she replied presently. The sound of a moving chair came from the next room. "I shall remember your words."

Nineteen does not easily despond, and Hester was by nature too buoyant to remain troubled by what was at most an unproved suspicion. Her soul was born of the sunshine; and no real shadow had ever darkened it. As time went on the strange fear that oppressed her lessened, and she grew

content to wait for the future to reveal whatever of mystery the present held. Though the Indian's words were not forgotten, they lay in the far background of her mind, nor had she any wish to call them forward.

Moreover, the swiftly crowding events of the next ten days left no room for reflection. Fate decreed that the scene of war should be transferred to the harvest hills of the Walloomsac, and turned the sunny valley into a vast arena. General John Stark and his bold New Hampshire men wound their way over the rocky barrier of hills and on the 7th of August came marching into "Mountain-walled" Manchester. By morning of the 9th Bennington knew that her defenders were at hand. Men swung their hats and shouted for joy, and drank to the success of Stark in foaming tankards of home-brewed beer.

The 9th of August was clear and cool, with a sky as richly blue as October's, and cloud-ships adrift in the light breeze. As Hester and her father rode toward Bennington through the early morning freshness the distant hills cast off their folds of eddying mist, and stood forth in bold relief. Hester's spirit was in accord with the brightness of the day; now and again she turned her head to throw laughing words to Polly, who with Mrs. Robinson and Miss Jane followed in the chaise.

Every porch and doorway in the main street of the town was filled with groups of eager men and women, and an occasional green-shirted ranger or a scout in buckskin and moccasins showed that an army was momentarily expected. From an upper window of the Catamount Tavern hung the pine-tree banner of old Massachusetts; its folds fluttering gaily in the light air. There was no other sign of decoration the entire length of the street.

When Hester and her father reached the Tavern they reined in their horses and waited until the chaise came up. Mrs. Robinson and Polly alighted, whereat Ezra Robinson looked at his wife in surprise.

“What mean you, Charlotte?” he demanded somewhat sharply. “Why do you stop here? Know you not that we are to go on to Landlord Dewey’s?”

Mrs. Robinson drew herself up calmly.

“I prefer to remain here, Ezra,” said she quietly but firmly.

Hester slipped quickly from Ti’s back and joined her mother. Ezra Robinson turned to his sister.

“Well, Jane, what shall you do?”

“I shall accompany my brother,” returned Miss Jane loftily.

Without another word Ezra Robinson reached

out, grasped Ti's bridle-rein, and rode on, leaving Miss Jane to follow at her discretion.

Mrs. Robinson and the girls went silently up the path to the Tavern. As soon as Captain Fay caught sight of them he rushed out, and caring little who saw, took his sister in his arms and kissed her tenderly. Mrs. Robinson's face paled, but a look of contentment came to it that Hester had rarely seen.

In the hall were many members of the Council; and the girls flushed with pleasure at a bow from courtly Ira Allen. Captain Fay led them to an upper room and pointed to chairs by the window. Then being too busy to stay longer, he hurried away. For half an hour they watched the people come and go; then an expectant hush fell upon the street. All eyes were turned up the elm-arched road; Polly and Hester leaned eagerly from the windows. Far away in the distance, like an echo from another land, sounded the faint thrill of fifes and the low pulsing of drums. Nearer yet and nearer, flinging its vibrant notes over the clear air, rang the stirring sound. The excited colour came and went in Hester's ardent face.

"They are playing 'Hearts of Oak,'" she whispered eagerly to Polly.

Then,—a stir of brown among the deep green foliage, the hot gleam of light on sword-hilt and musket-barrel, and the New Hampshire men

swung into sight, with swift light step, keeping time to the drum-beat. At their head rode Stark; a stalwart figure in his buff-and-blue. A stir ran through the watching throng, as they gazed on his resolute face, for the sight of the gallant fighter sent an electric thrill from heart to heart. This man, who had led in Indian warfare, who had held his own in the redoubt on Bunker Hill, who fought with Washington at Trenton,—he had come to save a state, perhaps to save a nation. A wild cheer rang through the street and echoed away above the valley.

“Stark! Stark! Stark! Long live New Hampshire!”

Beside Stark rode Colonel Warner; and instantly came another cry:

“Warner! Warner!” and “Remember Ethan Allen!”

Behind came the New Hampshire men, most of them clad in the hunters’ costume, with sun-browned faces, keen and strong beneath their caps of fringed deerskin.

As the line met the sight of those in the window, the music of the drums and fifes burst out afresh, with the gay notes of “Yankee Doodle.” When the head of the column reached the sign of the Catamount Stark and Warner dismounted, and strode up the path to the Tavern. The long line halted and stood at rest till they reappeared, and,

passing under the fluttering banner, remounted and gave the word to march.

“ Father and I went down to camp,
Along with Captain Goodwin,”

rang out the saucy jubilance of the fifes, with as clear an emphasis as if the words had been uttered. Stark’s brigade marched down the road and disappeared beneath the drooping elms. Then came the Green Mountain Boys, those brave men of the Hampshire Grants, outlaws from the Yorker’s tyranny, the followers of Ethan Allen; and at their head Herrick’s Rangers, in forest green, with sprigs of evergreen in their caps. Another cry rent the air:

“ Hurrah for young Vermont! Green Mountain Boys forever!”

And now the warm bright colour was flooding Hester’s face as the rose-colour floods the sky at sundown, for in the front rank rode Nathan Bennett. His eyes were raised to the window of the old Tavern, the window that framed a girlish figure in homespun blue, and his dark eyes saw but that one face. His hat was in his hand, and his fine dark head was held high. He may have guessed it before, but now he knew that his whole life held but one great joy—his love for Hester!

CHAPTER VI

ONE MAN PLAYS MANY PARTS

AUGUST 10, 1777, was Sunday in old Bennington, and never had the little town presented so active a scene. Stark was encamped two miles west of the meeting-house, at the foot of Mount Anthony, and as people made their way to the wooden church on the hill, their hearts were lighter than they had been for a month. They were in readiness for an attack, and they did not fear the outcome.

When Parson Dewey arrived, and took his place in the small bare pulpit, there was not a vacant seat to be seen that sunny August Sunday. General Stark himself occupied a pew in the middle aisle, with Colonel Warner at his right hand; while a little in front sat Ira Allen, Dr. Jonas Fay, and other members of the Council of Safety. Even the aisles were thronged, and by the doors were gathered groups of the New Hampshire men, while here and there a dash of green denoted the presence of Herrick's Rangers.

The service had begun, and the congregation

was in the middle of the first hymn, when Ezra Robinson and his wife and daughter entered, and made their way to a pew in the left aisle. Thereupon Neil Barton's eyes were turned in that direction. Between her father and mother Hester sat, straight and demure as became a Puritan maid. The windows of the church were open, and one could see the green of the elm boughs outside. But now the attention of all was fixed on the fervid face of the old preacher. With eyes that flashed as in youth, he strode back and forth in the narrow pulpit, his hands clenched in his ardour, his white head flung high; while the rafters echoed to the tones of his powerful voice. Advancing to the front of the pulpit, he paused, his right hand upraised.

“ Men, soldiers, patriots ! ” he cried in a voice of thunder; “ you that have wrested your homes from the grasp of the Yorkers, you that have fought the French and the Indian, you that have made this fair wilderness to blossom as the rose with peaceful hamlets, will ye give up this land that ye have won, and be the slaves of Britain ? ”

“ No ! No ! Never ! ” shouted a voice from the rear of the church.

“ Silence, sir ! ” cried Parson Dewey; “ how dare you interrupt the minister of God ! ”

He cleared his throat and proceeded.

“ Now is the war come on your borders. Pa-

One Man Plays Many Parts 75

triots, go forth! Meet the foe and conquer him! Fight for your homes, your children, and your God!"

A murmur of applause that would not be stilled ran through the congregation, swelling louder and louder till it burst in a triumphant shout.

"Hurrah for Parson Dewey! Hurrah for the Green Mountain Boys!"

A man in the Rangers' uniform sprang to his feet.

"And be our watch-word as was Ethan Allen's at old Ti, 'In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress'!"

At the mention of their beloved hero and his now famous words, the people went wild with excitement.

"Ethan Allen! Ethan Allen!" was heard on all sides, and the church rang and rang again to lusty cheers.

Throughout the entire scene Parson Dewey waited, unmoved, for the shouts to subside. When at last silence was restored, he resumed his discourse.

"Brethren," said he, sternly repressing a smile, "this demonstration is, most assuredly, of a nature unseemly for the Sabbath day. Nevertheless I have taken into account the somewhat inflammable state of your feelings, and will offer no further rebuke."

Thereupon he poised his spectacles upon his nose, and announced the closing hymn. The people rose, swept to their feet by a surge of excitement. The moment the service was over they crowded forward to shake hands with Parson Dewey, and to express their delight at his words. The good old preacher was calm and undisturbed as ever. He had lived too long among "those turbulent sons of freedom," as Stark called them, not to understand their feelings.

Ezra Robinson did not wait to congratulate the parson, but hurriedly pushed his way from the building, bearing Mrs. Robinson and Hester along with him. Once outside the door he turned to his wife and daughter:

"I have business at Landlord Dewey's. Wait you here for me." And before they could answer he was gone. Mrs. Robinson was at once engaged in conversation by Parson Dewey's wife, and Hester, to avoid the throng pouring from the church, wandered into the churchyard. Standing among the scattered head-stones, she looked out toward the range upon range of hills lifting their pine-robed summits. Her enjoyment was cut short by a step on the path and the sound of Neil's familiar voice. The girl turned, half-angry at the interruption. Neil, bowing, took her hand in his.

"Why do you come here, Hester?" he demanded, "I have sought you everywhere."

She did not answer. She drew her hand away. Neil went on:

"I think you avoid me, Hester," he said, with growing vexation. "I have scarce seen you since my return, and why have you not been to visit my mother?"

The gate of the churchyard opened again, and a figure came through it and up the path.

"Good-morning, Miss Robinson," cried a clear voice.

This time Hester welcomed the intrusion, glad to escape an answer to Neil's question. Something in the tone of her voice roused all the smouldering wrath in Neil's breast to fire. He wheeled about sharply and stood face to face with Nathan Bennett. Tall and handsome in his uniform of green faced with scarlet, the young captain gazed calmly into Neil's furious eyes. For more than a moment the two men stood looking at each other, defiance in the face of each. At length, unable to endure longer the quiet scorn of his rival, Neil, with blazing eyes, flung away to rejoin his mother. As she gazed after his retreating figure Hester had an impulse to call him back. It passed, however, and she remained silent. A few minutes later she and Nathan Bennett made their way from the churchyard to where Mrs. Robinson was waiting outside the gate. The people had dispersed, and only a few scattered groups were to be seen along

the street. Neil, from his stand in front of the church, saw the three figures disappear beneath the elms of the Catamotunt Tavern.

“The upstart!” raged Neil. “Such audacity! But he shall regret his impertinence!”

That Sunday evening Nathan Bennett, sitting at a table in the upper room of the Catamount Tavern, found himself unable to keep his mind at his work. At length, tired of contending against the drift of his thoughts, he pushed from him the half-written paper, and leaning back in his chair, resigned himself to gloomy reverie.

The door opened gently, and Captain Fay entered.

“Do I intrude, Nathan?” he asked, in his pleasant voice.

A look of perplexity passed over the young man’s face, then his brow cleared.

“What a dreamer of dreams I am!” he murmured hurriedly, “I had nigh forgotten where I was.” Then, rising quickly, “Never was good-fortune more welcome! Take yonder chair; ‘tis more comfortable.”

Captain Fay sat down by the hearth, on the opposite side of the table.

“I cannot work to-night,” said Nathan Bennett. “When I come to write, the words slip away. I am besieged by thoughts. When I am thus, I should like to fling myself on a horse and rush away

through the night, no matter where, only to escape —thinking. What a blessing and a curse it is!" he added, his voice sinking low with emotion.

A moth darted in at the open window and circled about the candle flame, skimming nearer and nearer. As if its movement had power to break the spell that bound him, Nathan Bennett turned his eyes from the fire to the motions of the struggling insect. Suddenly he put out his hand, seized the fluttering moth, bore it across the room, and flung it out of the window.

"I suppose that might be called 'misplaced effort,'" said he, half laughing. Then, his voice changing: "I have suffered too much not to have pity on any creature in distress, be it only a moth."

It was the only direct allusion he had ever made to his past. Captain Fay looked up, surprised. He rose, and, coming to the young man's side, placed a kindly hand upon his shoulder.

"Lad," he said, "lad, something troubles you. Will you not tell it and ease your heart? You may speak to me as a son to a father."

Again the almost startled look that had crossed Nathan Bennett's face when the Captain entered, returned to it.

"You have indeed been to me as a father, Captain Fay," he answered, gazing into his friend's benign face with a look of deep affection. "Yes,

even more than a father; as a mother. But I hope never to burden any life but my own with the secret of my sorrow." A look of disappointment on the Captain's face made him add quickly, "But there is something of which I would speak to you."

Thereupon he told of his last interview with Ezra Robinson, and the suspicion it awakened. Captain Fay listened gravely.

"It has an uncertain look, lad, that I grant; but, as you say, it may be but conjecture. Did Ira Allen speak to you of this subject?"

"He said he had suspicions, and bade me guard most carefully the secrets of the Council."

"Take my advice in this matter, Nathan. Be cautious, but do not form a final opinion until you have proof."

"We may doubt the constancy of Mr. Robinson," said Nathan Bennett, "but his wife and daughter are loyal to our cause."

"Truer patriot than Hester Robinson does not live!" cried Stephen Fay with fervour. "There is not a woman like her in all the country-side. Sweet of nature and true of soul, there is nothing she would not do for her country's sake." He paused and for some time gazed without speaking at the candle's flame. "It will be a sad day for me when she marries, for no man is worthy of her."

Nathan Bennett's dark eyes rested on the Captain's face with a look of sadness.

"It is true," he murmured softly, and again there followed a long silence.

Suddenly there sounded footsteps on the stairs, and Ira Allen's clear voice rang through the hall.

"Captain Fay, General Stark waits to see you."

Stephen Fay sprang to his feet.

"I must go, Nathan. A landlord's time is not his own." He took the young man's hand in his and pressed it warmly. "But if ever you want me, lad, I am at your service."

In a moment or so the door opened again, and the young secretary of the Council entered.

"Good-evening, Captain Bennett," said he, smiling. "By the looks of the table, I see you are engaged in business."

Nathan Bennett laughed, then sighed.

"Upon my word!" cried he, "I've had a restless mood, and have but wasted time."

"Well, then," said Ira Allen, laying some papers upon the table, "here is a matter which may interest you. What do you make of these documents?"

Nathan Bennett, examining the two papers before him, found that each was an order of the Council commanding all inhabitants within twenty miles of Bennington to supply the bearer with powder and provisions; and that each bore the signature of Ira Allen. At the end of his survey he looked up inquiringly.

"Are they identical? Don't you observe a difference?" said his questioner.

"Now I look closer I should say the handwriting of one was a little larger than that of the other. But of course—— Do you mean that this is a counterfeit?"

"I do," returned Allen, a peculiar smile curving his lips. "Let me tell you how I discovered it. A few days ago our scouts captured a Tory who had used this order to get provisions for Burgoyne's army. I examined the paper, wondering much how he happened to get it, for the Council never employs any but tried patriots on such business, and this man we had long suspected. Upon close inspection I saw the handwriting was a clever imitation of my own. The prisoner would not tell where he got it."

"Do you suspect anyone?" said Nathan, feeling his own fears confirmed.

Ira Allen knit his handsome brows.

"There is one of whom I have misgivings, I'll admit," said he.

The eyes of the two met, and Nathan Bennett read the other's thoughts.

"Is it Ezra Robinson?"

"Yes, you are right. It is Ezra Robinson. None other could have done the work so well. The more I think of it, the more sure I am. It's time 'twas proved, however. The Council has en-

trusted him with more valuable information than I think safe."

A mischievous light shone in Allen's eyes.

"Captain Bennett," cried he, "if you and I join hands, we may outwit the schemer at his own game."

He sat down at the table, thought for a moment, then dipped a pen into the ink and began to write.

It would have been hard to find a handsomer man than Ira Allen. He was a little above the medium in height, with a figure strong and graceful; a face at once gentle and determined; a fine head and high forehead, and large dark eyes which had a certain sadness, prophetic of the cruelly shadowed close of a life then in its early prime. Who could have known that Ira Allen, then in the flush of his handsome youth, would spend his last years poverty-stricken and friendless, unaided and unremembered by the State he had so nobly served, and lie in an unknown grave in the very city that gave birth to independence! But no shade of a bitter fate lay upon him as he sat there in the fire-light, and made his plans. In the ardour of his patriotism, no shadow of future sorrow had power to move him. Quick-witted, kind-hearted and true; faithful alike to his State and nation, this was he to whom Vermont owes a debt of boundless gratitude; a debt which after

a hundred years still remains unpaid by any lasting honour done his memory.

In a few moments he pushed the paper toward Nathan Bennett.

"What do you think of that, sir?" he demanded.

The other read it through.

"Mr. Allen," he cried, "you are a born plotter. I would the Continental Congress had half your wit. But how will you carry this out?"

"Draw your chair nearer, Captain Bennett; even owls and frogs have been known to listen."

An hour later Ira Allen rose, saying:

"Good luck attend you, my fellow-conspirator. Let me know as soon as possible how the land lies."

"'Tis easily done," Nathan muttered, by himself. "And yet would I not betray a confidence? But I cannot leave the matter as it is, and there can be no harm in the experiment. There's just enough spice of adventure in it to suit me."

And flinging himself into his chair, he drew up the unfinished paper and began to write.

It was Monday evening of the same week and the August twilight was beginning to spread itself over the landscape when a horse and rider made their way along the road that led to the Robinson house. The man was tall and strongly built, wrapped in a long cloak which effectually concealed the greater portion of his figure. The upper part

of his face was hidden by a broad-brimmed hat like that worn by Quakers, leaving open to view a pair of watchful dark eyes, a straight nose, and a mouth and chin nearly obscured by a thick black beard. He frequently turned in his saddle to throw a glance at the road over which he had come, and he did not cease to urge his horse to a swifter pace. At length the white timbers of the Robinson house loomed before him out of the gathering darkness. Riding up to the porch, the stranger alighted, and having fastened his horse, mounted the steps. For a minute or two he stood looking out over the grey sea of field and forest, then he raised his hand, and the brass knocker rang through the still air. There was a sound of distant voices, a patter of foot-steps on the bare floor of the hall, and he heard the bolt withdrawn. The next instant the door opened, and Hester Robinson stood on the threshold. The stranger stared at her without speaking. There was wonder in her eyes, but if there was fear in her heart there was none in her face.

“ What is your purpose here, sir? ”

“ I come on an errand of importance. Is Captain Robinson within? ” he demanded in a deep harsh voice.

She instantly resented his imperious tone.

“ If you will wait, I will speak to my father, ” she said coldly.

"I am in no mood for waiting. Let me enter!" and with these words he pushed past her into the hall. The angry colour rushed to Hester's face. She turned upon him with blazing eyes.

"What do you mean by such behaviour, sir?"

He interrupted her sharply: "I have no time to waste in words. Go you to Mr. Robinson and tell him that Richard Farlow must see him at once."

Quivering with indignation Hester sped up the stairs to her father's room, and entered without knocking. For all her self-control she could not banish the anger from her voice as she repeated the message.

"I hope you will have nothing to do with him, father. He is very rude. He did not even bow. No gentleman would behave so."

"I am sorry he displeased you, child. But in war-time one cannot pick and choose. We must endure all sorts and conditions of men. And it may really be a matter of importance."

When Richard Farlow entered the candle-lit room Ezra Robinson, rising from his chair by the table, regarded him with inquiring eyes. The stranger closed the door and calmly turned the key. A terrible fear sprang to Ezra Robinson's heart. For a moment he stood, half-stunned, one hand grasping the table for support. Then his self-control returned and he took a few steps for-

ward till his hand could rest on a pistol that lay half-concealed beneath a mass of papers.

"Do you mean to threaten me, sir?" he demanded sternly.

"Far from it, far from it, Mr. Robinson," returned the undisturbed stranger, "but such words as I would speak to you must be uttered behind closed doors."

"Explain yourself, sir."

Richard Farlow advanced to within a step of his hearer and dropped his voice till it scarcely rose above a whisper.

"Mr. Robinson, I will be frank with you. I am Richard Farlow, a loyalist of New York city, holding the commission of captain above His Majesty's signature. I need not tell you by what means the British Government became informed that you, Ezra Robinson, sometime a soldier in the rebel army, were turning toward your rightful allegiance. Enough that it is so. Furthermore, it became known to certain servants of the crown that you were in direct communication with the Council of Safety of the so-called 'Hampshire Grants,' and that you have in your possession papers valuable to His Majesty's cause. If this be true, I am chosen to confer with you concerning the transfer of these papers to their lawful owners—that is to say, the British power, and to reward you suitably for your part in the matter. What do you say to this?"

He ceased to speak, and stood with folded arms, watching the other closely. Ezra Robinson's brows were knit as in pain, and his eyes sought the floor in a troubled gaze. He hesitated, then yielded a point.

"What proof have I that you are what you claim to be? That you are not dealing falsely with me?"

"Only this," answered Farlow, extending a paper.

Ezra Robinson read it silently.

"It is sufficient," said he; "now I can trust you. Will you sit down?"

The two men seated themselves on opposite sides of the table, and leaning over it, talked in tones hushed and rapid.

"This affair must be arranged with great caution," said Ezra Robinson with emphasis. "These Green Mountain Boys are as keen-eyed as cata-munts. It would be death to me were I detected, and indeed I'd not vouch for your welfare, were your meddling discovered. You doubtless remember the form of justice administered to your fellow-Yorkers not many years since."

"Ah, the 'Beech-Seal'! Small danger of that, now Ethan Allen's a prisoner. There is little risk, Mr. Robinson, and that I will take upon myself. I am unknown at Bennington, and I lodge at the tavern at Arlington. With the transfer of the

papers your apprehensions cease. So let's to the core of the matter. What information have you valuable to the King?"

Again Ezra Robinson hesitated. He rose to his feet, and began to pace the room, with head bowed, and hands clasped behind him. Yet why should he waver now? Ever since the fall of Ticonderoga he had been secretly striving to aid the cause of the King, to hinder the cause of the patriots. He had hardened his heart against the appeal of his country, he had placed himself in secret among her enemies; and yet, now that he had reached the parting of the ways, now that he must decide for once and for all, he paused with an inward shrinking. The candles faded, and instead of the face of the stranger he saw before him his fellow-townsmen, those who held nothing greater than their country's good. And in the face of each there was scorn unutterable. A traitor! Their faces vanished and in their stead came a girl's face —Hester's. The eyes followed him. They seemed to plead with him, to implore him, to turn back while it was yet time. Hester! Hester!—Fancies all! He was standing in the silent room; and the stranger's eyes were fixed upon him. Then all the old injustice that had so long embittered his soul leaped up within him.

"I have two papers of importance; one containing a list of the contents of the Bennington

store-houses; the other the enrolment and equipment of Stark's force. I have had hard enough work to secure them. The Council appeared cautious."

"Oho! Lynxes though they be, a cunning fox may outwit them! Well, let's see the papers!"

"They are carefully locked away with others," said Ezra Robinson slowly. "Moreover, you have not said what my reward should be for all my trouble. The information is priceless."

"If the papers contain what I suppose, your reward will indeed be ample, and though I cannot say with certainty until I see the contents, it should not be far from the neighbourhood of one hundred pounds. But you say you cannot produce the papers immediately? In that case I must needs come again, for I dare not excite suspicion by too long an absence. What say you to eight o'clock to-morrow night? If I returned then would you have them in readiness?"

"To-morrow night the papers shall be yours," answered Ezra Robinson.

"Then the matter is concluded," said Farlow, rising and drawing his cloak around him. "To-morrow night you shall receive your reward. Till then, farewell."

He turned and quietly bowing himself out, made his way silently downstairs and out of the house. He set off at a gallop, but once out of hearing of

the house, reined down to a walk. And at the crossroads he did not turn toward Arlington, but held his way straight eastward toward Bennington.

“ Better, a thousand times better that I had never meddled in this affair,” he said to himself. “ Nathan Bennett, your accursed curiosity has brought you to this. The man trusts me utterly; has, though he knows it not, put his life in my hands. And what shall I do? Retreat now I have begun? That is only for cowards. See the matter through? But what then? Show the papers to the Council, tell them my story, have the man arrested and hanged? No, no, never that! For I love Hester with all my heart, and I cannot cause the death of her father! What a plight I am in! Hester on the one side, my country on the other! ”

His horse started, then came to a standstill.

“ A fair night has m’sieu’ for his ride,” said a low voice.

A few yards ahead stood a figure by the roadside; a figure motionless as the shadows that surrounded it. It was the Indian, Cochise. Here was a new obstacle! Suppose the Indian should detect his disguise? Nathan Bennett’s one desire was to pass him unsuspected.

“ My good fellow,” said he, taking more pains than usual to conceal his natural voice, “ my good fellow, can you tell me how far distant is Ben-

nington? I am strange to this country and uncertain of my way."

The Indian glanced upward at a large white cloud now within a few degrees of the moon.

"M'sieu', if the horse be swift of foot, you will find the town of the valley when the moon and the clouds meet."

"Thanks, friend," returned Nathan Bennett, giving his horse a light touch of the spur. As he passed the silent figure he could not help bestowing a furtive glance upon it, and despite the shadows he was conscious that the keen eyes were watching him closely. Instinctively his hand stole to the pistol in his holster, and lingered there. Yet the Indian made no threatening motion. Quiet as the tree-trunk by his side, he stood with folded arms while the horseman passed. Yet before the rider was three feet away he turned and strode after him.

"M'sieu', I would speak a word with you."

Nathan Bennett gave the Indian another stealthy look. Cochise, striding along by the road-side, kept easy pace with the horse.

"I have heard the owl cry and the catamount scream," said the young Indian, with slow emphasis. "Sometimes have I heard a man cry as an owl and scream as a catamount. With two voices a man may speak; his own and another's. Two hearts may one man have; a heart that is light and

One Man Plays Many Parts 93

a heart that is dark. M'sieu', do you understand? Why go you as another to the house on the hill?"

" My good fellow, you mistake me. I am Richard Farlow of New York. I have business with Mr. Robinson."

Cochise laid one hand on the horse's bridle, and raised the other impressively.

" They may blind the face of the white man; but he that is born of the forest, the child of the woods and the winds, his face they cannot blind. M'sieu', I have said."

And he turned and vanished among the trees.

CHAPTER VII

THE LITTLE BLUE-BELL OF THE WOODS

EZRA ROBINSON awoke next morning with a feeling of exultation. Throughout the night he had struggled with his conscience, striving hard to subdue the fierce contest of his earlier instincts. There had been times when, in the hush of night, nature had conquered; when the almost extinguished fire of patriotism had seemed to burn once more. But with the day the old evil desire returned with full strength and he felt triumphant at having outwitted the Council.

The morning passed far differently for Ezra Robinson and the others of his household. Directly after breakfast he returned to his room, drew aside a panel in the wall, and taking a roll of papers from its hiding-place spread them out upon the table. Arranging them with nervous fingers, he separated from the rest those pertaining to the store-houses and Stark's army; and folding them into the smallest possible compass, thrust them into an inner pocket of his coat. Then he returned the others to their place of concealment. This done he sat down at the table and began to write.

The light footsteps and the ripple of girlish laughter in the room below provoked his anger. He knew full well what was being done, and he set his teeth at his own inability to prevent it. Making bullets for the Council out of his own lead! What were the Americans but rebels, one and all?

Restraining himself as well as he could, he wrote on till Miss Jane's voice attracted his attention; then, glad of a diversion, put aside his pen, and descended to greet his sister.

At the same moment there was a sharp report of a musket outside, apparently at no great distance from the house. Hester, rising from the spinning-wheel, gave a hurried glance toward the window.

"It must be Cochise," whispered Polly.

The other occupants of the room did not even look up. The firing of a shot was too common an occurrence to be alarming.

Hester glanced at Miss Jane and saw that for the moment her back was turned. Taking instant advantage of her aunt's inattention, she stole quietly to the door, and slipped out unnoticed. With her hand above her eyes, she stood looking westward over the stretch of meadow-land and hills. A figure in hunter's costume, carrying a long musket, was coming across the field. It was Cochise. Hester waited for him to approach.

"Cochise, was it your rifle that we heard?" asked Hester as he drew nearer.

"Yes, mam'selle," the young half-breed answered slowly, "when we come to the valley, the gun of the scout must speak, that they of the town may know that a friend is near."

Hester glanced hurriedly toward the house, then perceiving that she was unwatched, approached a step nearer the young Indian.

"Cochise," she pleaded, "let me take your rifle a moment. Captain Ellis vowed I could not hit the limb of yonder pine, and I want to prove him mistaken."

"The gun ees too heavy for you, mam'selle," said Cochise, in hesitation.

"Oh, no, 'tis not," cried Hester, taking the gun in her hands. Springing a step backward, with a mischievous laugh she ran her fingers along the smooth barrel.

"Now to disprove the Captain's boast," she cried, and with the words she raised the heavy musket, and steadyng it against her shoulder, took aim at the dead limb of a pine which stood some hundred feet away. For a minute and more she remained motionless, the rifle held in firm poise; then her quick fingers closed over the trigger and the shot rang out. A branch severed from the dead limb fell to the ground. Cochise ran to pick it up. and returning, pointed triumphantly

to a bullet imbedded in the wood. The girl flushed with pleasure.

“ ‘Twas not so bad a shot, was it, Cochise?” she asked, returning the musket.

“ Mam’selle,” said the young half-breed, “many men there are who would be proud to aim so true.”

Just then the sound of Miss Jane’s voice calling, cut short her triumph, and turning, she fled with swift and noiseless foot-steps into the house.

At three o’clock that afternoon the girls were ensconced in their room.

“ Oh, Hester,” burst out Polly, “ we have two whole hours to spend as we will. Aunt Jane and Aunt Charlotte and Uncle Ezra have ridden to the village. Is it not fine to have so much time to one’s self?” And Polly gaily tripped a few steps of the minuet.

“ I shall take the book that Captain Bennett gave me, and go down to the great pine and read. Oh, Polly, ‘tis so interesting, and scarce a chance have I had to do aught but glance at it in nigh two weeks.”

“ I shall sit in the garden and embroider my kerchief,” began Polly.

“ And wait for Captain Ellis,” finished Hester. Polly blushed scarlet, but made no denial.

Hester, with the book under her arm, presently

made her way toward her favourite place of refuge, a pleasant grassy knoll shaded by a tall pine.

In this retreat she rested until a shadow fell across the page, and lay dark upon the grass. Half-frightened at the suddenness of the interruption, she sprang to her feet, her breath coming quick with alarm. There, beside her, so near that she could have touched him, stood Ellis, a provoking smile upon his face.

“Pardon me, Mistress Hester, for stealing upon you thus, but as I came along by the wood-path I saw you sitting here, and you made so fair a picture that I could not but look upon it.”

The warm colour leaped to Hester’s face, the anger to her heart as she realised that he had been watching her for some time. She tried to draw her hand from his grasp, light yet firm, but he held it fast. He instantly observed the look on her face.

“Do not go, Hester; do not be angry with me,” he said almost beseechingly. “Surely ‘tis no great crime when a maid is so fair, for a man to look upon her.”

Hester sought in vain for something to say; her thoughts seemed suddenly to have flown to the uttermost parts of the earth; and a moment of silence followed in which she was as miserable and ill at ease as Ellis was calm and contented. At length she exclaimed with an effort:

"I left Polly in the garden, and I must go to find her. Let us walk toward the house."

"With the greatest of pleasure, since you are my companion," replied Ellis, with a bow, and an admiring look.

Then as she took a step forward he exclaimed:

"But you have left your book and your flowers. Let me pick them up."

Angry, not only at her own discomfiture, but at her companion's self-possession, Hester took the book from his hand; then catching up the flowers before he could reach them, she tumbled them into a fold of her skirt, and set off homeward at a swifter pace than is generally chosen for an afternoon walk. She kept her eyes upon the chain of distant hills. Ellis, walking by her side, calmly studied the proud poise of her head and the stern sweetness of her face. The memory of that day in the woods came back to him, that day when her eyes had met his, and he had feared that his soul and its secret lay open to her gaze. He was certain now that she had not suspected him, yet he knew well that there lay between them a certain antipathy, hard to define, doubly hard to remove. Then the resolution taken on the night of the dance, to break down the barrier of dislike that she had raised, came back to him with deeper force than before. Here was a woman worth the winning, not a careless coquette. He had never

yet failed in any purpose to which he put the utter strength of heart and will, and he would not fail now.

Hester broke the silence and the thread of his thoughts.

"Do you remember, Captain Ellis, your boast that a girl could not aim a gun as a man could? Well, I fired a musket this morning in order to disprove your words. Cochise is my witness. And I will show you the bullet in the wood."

She was beginning to recover her composure. He looked at her with the admiration that she hated.

"My boast is not broken, nevertheless," he said, with less nonchalance than usual in his tone. "There are exceptions to all rules, and you are an exceptional girl."

Hester turned scarlet again and did not answer. They had now come to a narrow foot-bridge, spanning a little stream, and Ellis took her arm in order to help her across the slippery logs. She shrank from his touch as if he had struck her. At this and at her heightened colour the mocking curves deepened upon Ellis's lips, and he gave her an amused glance, which, however, fell short, since she did not turn to meet it.

It would have been hard to tell why she disliked him so; whether it was his habitual flippancy of speech, his gay carelessness of manner,

or a cause far deeper, the antagonism of soul to soul.

They were near the house when Ellis turned to her.

"You have some beautiful flowers there," he said. "Will you not give me a few?"

His voice had a ring of sincerity.

"Why, yes, if you wish them," she said, half hesitating.

She hurriedly selected some of the blue-bells and gave them to him.

"'Tis a fair flower," he murmured. "That is the name Cochise has given you. 'The Little Blue-bell of the Woods.' 'Tis a name both sweet and fitting."

He watched her closely, but she did not turn or speak.

He drew nearer to her and touched her hand.

"Do you doubt me, Hester? Do you doubt that my words are true?"

"What do you suppose Polly will think when she finds you have neglected her thus?" demanded Hester, ignoring his question.

"I do not think she will be jealous because I have spent a few moments with her cousin, who is as hard to please as she is beautiful," said Ellis in a low tone.

Hester ascended the steps of the porch, then at the top she turned to him.

"Go you to the garden and find Polly," she said." "And, Captain Ellis," her voice was clear and resolute, "I pray you keep your pretty speeches for the maids that like them, but waste them not on me. This is not a time for flippant words and idle flattery. 'Tis a time to be brave and true. The enemy is near at hand; and they that are men will go forth to meet him."

She was leaning against the porch railing, with the light of the August sunset upon her fair young face. For the moment Mark Ellis forgot that his part was assumed. Her words awakened some stirrings of nobler ambition; and as he looked up at her, standing there, there was truth in his eyes and truth in his soul. But the better mood passed swiftly as a star passes over a dark sky; leaving the night all the blacker. The old mockery was once more upon his face.

He raised the flowers that he held and looking full at her, pressed them to his lips.

"For your sake, fair Hester," he said, smiling.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TALE ONE EVENING TOLD

IT was with a purpose that Mark Ellis had ridden over from Arlington, and that was, not his determination to conquer Hester, strong though the desire was, but another and more urgent matter. Two hours earlier he had heard news which had caused him to spring into the saddle and set out for the Robinson house at a pace which left his horse spent and foam-flecked. Therefore his meeting with Hester was but chance, though he had welcomed it none the less. The moment that she left him he changed instantly from the gallant courtier to the man engaged in a grave and desperate enterprise.

Polly now had disappeared from the garden and the place was silent and deserted. Ellis, deep in thought, seated himself on one of the steps leading up to a vine-clad arbour. He rested his head on one hand, and looked down the dim vistas of the garden. His handsome face wore a look of dangerous determination.

“ Faith, I’ll make *him* do it,” he muttered musingly; “ not but what I’d like the chance myself, but I’ve other work on hand.”

Ezra Robinson opened the gate and made his way down the path to the arbour. When he was within speaking distance Ellis rose, saying calmly:

"I give you good-evening, Mr. Robinson. You have come in time."

Ezra Robinson started at the sight of Ellis; but partially recovering himself, exclaimed quickly:

"Why are you here, Mark? Is there aught wrong?"

Then coming nearer, he caught Ellis by the wrist, crying, in a voice hoarse with fear:

"Tell me not our plans are discovered!"

"Trouble not yourself on that score," returned Ellis with a scornful laugh. "There is no one of wit enough to discover them. However, I have important news," he continued, drawing Ezra Robinson within the deeper shade of the vines. "And 'tis not my intention to be heard by any other pair of ears. You know," he went on, "that Stark is put to it to decide whether he shall remain where he is, or march westward to join Gates. This afternoon I was informed by a trusty messenger of the King,"—here he paused impressively, his voice falling to a whisper,— "that Burgoyne has sent troops under Colonel Baum to capture Bennington! What think you of that?" he added, with an air of triumph, surveying the astonishment in his hearer's face.

"But my direct purpose is this: Mr. Robinson, you have papers that Baum would give his life to hold! Here lies your opportunity; a fleet horse, a ride of twenty miles or so, and those papers will be in Baum's hands, their equivalent in the King's gold in your own. Do you hear me, man? This is not a chance to be played with. Upon my life, I'd like to risk it myself, but I've another enterprise which holds me back."

And pausing, he patted the hilt of his sword caressingly, as if it were a thing of life.

For a moment Ezra Robinson, half-dazed at his companion's tidings, continued to stare at him in amazement. Then, hurriedly collecting his thoughts, he began to consider the possibility of the plan which Ellis had proposed. Suddenly, as if a lightning-flash had revealed to him his innermost mind, he perceived that here was the opportunity for which he had been longing. Here was a way to escape an interview with the stranger; an interview which his fears, however groundless, made him dread; while by quick action and cool determination he might win for himself distinction hitherto undreamed of. And even if the highest pinnacle of his hopes were unattainable, he was at least sure of Baum's protection and reward.

On the other hand, the stranger's offer of one hundred pounds tempted him sorely. Could he

be sure of as large a sum from Baum? Should he not inform Mark Ellis of Richard Farlow and ask his opinion of the stranger's fidelity? No! he would tell no man of an enterprise that was strictly his own; and there was a possibility that after the papers had been delivered to Baum he might yet win the one hundred pounds by supplying the stranger with copies of them, provided, of course, that Richard Farlow and Burgoyne's colonel were not in league with each other.

As it is true that those who have once engaged in intrigue seek the more readily to engage in it again, so Ezra Robinson, having involved himself in one web, sought to weave another.

His course decided upon, he turned to Ellis, who, during his companion's reverie, had been leaning against the arbour, staring carelessly at the darkening landscape.

"Lad, I'll do it," said Ezra Robinson.

"You've made up your mind, have you?" said Ellis rather scornfully. "Well, here's some advice. You'd best tell no one by what road or in what direction you are going."

Ezra Robinson drew out his watch.

"'Tis nigh seven," he said; "I can start in half-an-hour."

"If you are wise, you'll waste little time 'twixt now and starting," retorted Ellis.

Nothing more was said; and the two left the

garden in silence. The soft greyness had deepened into night; and a few stars flashed out.

"Will you not stay for supper, Mark?" asked Ezra, when they had reached the door.

"Faith, no, I can't. Would that I might," Ellis made answer, looking thoughtfully at the lighted windows of the house and at a girlish figure, which even as he looked framed itself in the doorway, then as suddenly vanished.

"Fate ever stands in the way of our wishes," added Ellis, smiling at a pleasant thought which crossed his mind. "A matter in Arlington prevents my tarrying here." This last with a side-long glance at his companion.

With a gay "farewell" he flung himself into the saddle of his black horse, and dashed off into the night at a pace which only one as reckless as he would have chosen.

Having taken a hurried supper, Ezra Robinson went upstairs to make the final preparations for his ride. First lighting the candles on table and chimney-piece, he next drew the papers from his coat and examined them carefully. Then taking a step toward the panel in the wall, he stood regarding it irresolutely, seized by the thought that during his absence the house might be searched, and these papers, many of them proofs of his dealing with the British cause, discovered and delivered to the Council. They were too valuable to be

destroyed, and he could not take them with him. Another plan occurred to him, however, and opening the door into the hall, he called to Hester, waiting for her with his back to the table and his face in the shadow.

In a moment Hester entered, pausing just inside the door, with a look of inquiry. A sudden qualm smote Ezra Robinson at the way in which he must deceive her; yet no other course was open to him. He trusted her absolutely, knowing well that her great love for him would blind her to all suspicion.

"Hester," he said slowly, trying to speak in his usual even tones, "I ride to-night on a mission of great moment. But before I go, I must intrust you with a secret."

Despite himself, he could not wholly banish the emotion from his voice. She instantly perceived it, and came quickly to his side.

"Oh, father, is it an errand of great danger?" she whispered softly.

Her fingers gently touched his arm; she looked up into his face with imploring eyes. Unconsciously he drew back, for even her touch awoke in him a sense of deeper shame.

"'Tis not the danger that troubles me," he said in answer to her question, "'tis the responsibility that weighs me down. *Upon my success hangs the fate of Stark's army!*"

With wide eyes and quick-coming breath, Hester stood motionless, bewildered by the significance of his reply.

“The fate of Stark’s army,” she repeated slowly.

“Come closer, Hester,” Robinson said gravely, “and remember, for the love you bear me, that you tell to no one what I am about to say.”

He took a candle from the table, and held it so that its light fell upon the panel in the wall, while he waited for her to speak. She was pale, but she answered bravely:

“Father, a secret of our cause is always sacred. I will guard it with my life.”

“There are papers here, Hester, with which the Council has intrusted me. I am responsible for their safety. You understand me? No one is to see this room, much less to enter it.”

“I understand,” she said simply.

“Not that I foresee any trouble,” he continued, in a more reassuring tone, “but in a matter like this one cannot be too wary. Therefore to all save Richard Farlow you will say that you know not where I have gone, and you will speak the truth, for I shall not tell you whither I ride to-night.”

He paused in order to let the words sink into her mind; and for a space there was silence, in which his eyes, as if to observe the effect of his

command, sought her face. She gave a little restless movement.

"But to Richard Farlow," he continued, "a reason must be given; for I promised to meet him this night at eight o'clock, and I must offer an explanation for breaking my word. Therefore, to Richard Farlow you shall say," here he raised his right hand in emphasis, "*that I rode away to-night on an important mission.* Repeat the words after me."

She started in surprise at this request, but she obeyed.

"That is all, then. See that the doors and windows are carefully barred; and not a word of this matter to your mother or Polly. I shall be home long before daybreak."

A few minutes later Ezra Robinson went swiftly down the stairs and out into the night. Having saddled his horse by the faint light of a lantern, he mounted, and rode slowly northward, keeping within the deep shadows of the orchard trees. The night was cloudy, with now and then a faint gleam of moonlight. When he reached the main road he reined in his horse and listened intently for the sound of hoofs. The silence was deep and unbroken. At length, satisfied that the way was safe, he put spurs to his horse and was swallowed up by the enveloping darkness.

Meantime Hester, on the porch, had stood with

clasped hands and troubled eyes till the last echo of the hoof-beats faded into the silence. Then she entered the hall and barred the door behind her.

The tall clock on the landing was striking eight when a thundering knock rang through the house. Hester, looking out at an upper window, beheld in the uncertain light a tall cloaked figure, in whom she thought she descried Richard Farlow. Hurriedly descending the stairs, she withdrew the bolts and the stranger entered. Hester paused before speaking, remembering her unpleasant impression of the preceding evening, but as Farlow remained silent, she was forced to begin.

“ My father bade me tell you, sir, that he rode to-night on a mission of importance; and for that reason he must postpone his interview with you.”

The visitor’s calm indifference of manner gave way instantly to a look of animated interest.

“ What’s this? He has gone away? He cannot see me? ”

Hester repeated her message.

“ But this is serious! I have tidings he should hear this moment! And time presses! ”

He paused as if perplexed.

“ Whither did he go? ” he continued rapidly. “ Which road did he take? You must pardon my rude persistency, madam, but much depends upon my knowing. ”

His tone was low and courteous, and his man-

ner so different from what it had been on his former visit that Hester found it hard to believe that this man and the rude stranger of the night before were one.

"I do not know," she said. "He did not tell me."

In his agitation Richard Farlow drew nearer:

"But you must know what *direction* he took!" he cried, insistence in his voice and manner. "For heaven's sake, if you know aught, do not withhold it; when the fate of a cause may lie in your answer!"

She started violently at his words, but remained speechless, perplexity written upon her face. What should she do? She had her father's imperative command to tell no one what road he had taken; yet here was this sudden exigency when silence might work more harm than speech.

She looked up quickly, her clear eyes meeting his.

"Do you mean this? Or are you deceiving me? Does the American cause hang on my knowledge?"

"I have spoken the truth, madam."

"Upon your honour?"

"Upon my honour, yes!"

"I can tell you naught save the road he took. Will you try to follow him?"

"To the last of my strength! Till I overtake

him and deliver my message," he cried passionately.

"To overtake him will be impossible, for he rode at a gallop, and the night is dark, but if for the sake of our cause you must know the way he went,"—she paused then, her voice sinking low with intensity, "he rode to the north, and he rode as the wind."

There was no mistaking the genuineness of the emotion on the stranger's face.

"To the north!" he cried wildly, "then may Fate,"—and paused abruptly. "How long has he been gone?"

"Not over ten minutes at most."

The stranger waited no longer. Springing to the door, he flung it open and rushed out before Hester could recover from her surprise.

In an instant, however, she ran to an open window, and with her hand shading her eyes peered steadily into the dimness. The moonlight had grown stronger and she could see the dark lines of hills and the lighter stretches of open country. The memory of that night when Cochise had ridden to Bennington came back to her, and she fancied that the dying hoofbeats were those of St. Clair's Indian messenger.

The touch of the night-wind on her face recalled her to the present. She closed the window and returned to the kitchen. Mrs. Robinson and

Polly were upstairs, and Hester found herself alone in the great room. She set to work at her quilting-frame calmly enough, but soon the silence began to oppress her, and now and again she raised her head to listen intently. The door-latch shaken by a passing gust, the windows quivering in their loose frames, the pine-wood snapping on the hearth, made her start and glance nervously round the room.

At any other time Hester would have laughed at herself for noticing such trivial sounds. To-night her soul was under so high a pressure of excitement that the slightest touch alarmed her. For some time she kept herself at her task; but she accomplished little, and the hour seemed evening-long. When the clock struck nine she rose, and hurrying through the dim hall and up the dark stairs went in search of Polly. She found her cousin in her room, gazing abstractedly into the mirror.

Hester crossed to the window and looked out. Suddenly she gave a low cry of terror which brought Polly to her side.

“Look!” gasped Hester, pointing.

Along the gentle slope, a few rods west of the house, could be seen approaching the dark forms of a dozen horsemen. The clouds had fallen away and the moon shone full upon them.

Hester pressed Polly’s hand tightly.

"They are coming here," she whispered, without a quiver.

She turned from the window and ran to the door. All her fear was gone. The face on which the candle-light shone was calm and unflinching.

"I shall put a light in the attic, Polly, as a signal for help," she said.

She ran across the hall to her father's room and hurriedly lighting the lantern which hung in the corner sped with it up the steep stairs to the attic. Groping her way across the dimness, she placed the lantern in the highest of the garret windows—that facing the east. Then swiftly and noiselessly she descended the stairs and joined Polly in the silence of the lower hall. For a moment the two girls stood motionless, looking into each other's faces. The trampling of hoofs outside was borne plainly to their ears. It was quickly followed by the tread of feet on the porch, and the next instant the door quivered beneath heavy blows.

Releasing Polly's hand, Hester ran to the kitchen; snatching down the musket and powder-horn from above the dresser, she returned to the hall and approaching the door, demanded firmly:

"What do you want?"

"Admittance, and without more delay!" cried a stern voice.

"You shall not enter till you make known your purpose," returned the girl.

"When we're within, our purpose will be manifest," was the sharp retort. "Open the door, or we will break it down!"

Seeing that further parley was impossible, Hester drew back the heavy bars, and the door being rudely flung open, a dozen men, well concealed by cloaks and riding-masks, burst into the hall. Hester, springing backward, stood, a determined figure, between them and the stairs. She had already divined their identity. They were without doubt the band of Arlington Tories who roamed the country-side. What she did not guess was that Mark Ellis, who had long desired to get into his possession the papers which Ezra Robinson had refused to give him, had devised this raid on the house in its owner's absence, not risking a direct part in it, however, lest he be discovered.

On the other hand, the intruders, standing just inside the door, beheld a surprising sight, a sight so unexpected that it made them pause—a girl in white kerchief and blue-grey linen gown, with a powder-horn slung across her shoulders and a bunch of faded blue-bells at her breast. She held the musket in both hands, its barrel pointing downward, but her fingers dangerously near the trigger. She had drawn her lithe figure to its fullest height, and her head was held in fearless poise. Her face

wore a stern beauty; her red lips were set in a hard line. She stood; a perfect model of the young land she loved.

For a moment there was absolute silence; then the leader of the band advanced, and bowing, exclaimed in a tone not untouched by irony.

“ You need not fear us, fair mistress. We but intend to search this house; since we have been told an American spy lies hidden here.”

Hester did not move. With anger in her face and voice she answered firmly:

“ You have no right to search a house without the permission of its owner; and I refuse you that permission.”

Another ominous silence followed: during which Hester, outwardly calm, felt her heart beating wildly. Despair was closing in upon her. Would her signal be seen in time for rescue? If not, what would happen?

The leader now spoke in whispered tones to a few of the band, while the rest employed the moment in looking sharply about the room. The wide hall was lighted by two candles on the mantel-shelf and the glow of a few logs on the hearth. One place alone the fire left in shadow. The parlour door was half-open, and the room beyond it was dark and silent. The leader of the band, staring into the darkness, could see only the dim outline of a window and the dimmer gleam

of moonlight outside. He resolved to wait no longer. Springing forward he seized Hester by the arm.

"Stand aside, my pretty maid, and let us pass."

With a look of scorn, she freed herself from his grasp, then, turning, ran up the stairway, and pausing just below the landing, raised her musket to her breast. The leader laughed loudly, a mocking laugh that echoed through the silent hall.

"Come on, men!" he shouted, just as Polly, with a piteous cry, flung herself in front of Hester, as if to shield her from attack. "'Tis naught but a garrison of maids and 'twill soon be ours."

The men swept forward to the foot of the stairs; a dozen men, ruthless and determined; and gazed up into the brave eyes and proud white face of the girl above them. Then her voice rang out, clear and decisive:

"I will shoot the first man who sets foot on the stair."

There was a pause, a cry, a rush of feet, and a shot rang out, crashing above the tumult. The foremost of the Tory band swayed and fell. The rest, checked in their mad rush, stared as if petrified at the half-open parlour door above which hung a ring of smoke. The shot had come from without; Hester had not fired it. There was a cry from one of the Tories.

“The Green Mountain Boys! The Green Mountain Boys are upon us!”

Without a glance at their wounded comrade the men flung themselves across the room and out of the door. Appalling silence took the place of strife. Save for Hester and Polly and the huddled figure on the staircase, no creature breathed in the hall. Musket in hand, Hester crept slowly downward. In doing so, she was forced to pass the wounded Tory and at this she could not repress a cry, for he lay bleeding and unconscious. All else was forgotten in the wave of pity that swept over her, as she knelt beside him, striving to bind his wound. As she was thus engaged, a slight sound in the room adjoining caught her ear, and looking up quickly she beheld Cochise standing upon the threshold. His musket was flung carelessly across his arm, and his figure was held in its usual easy pose. His face wore a look of anxiety, which vanished as she sprang to meet him.

“Oh, Cochise, it is Cochise!” she cried eagerly, catching his hand in hers in her gratitude. Then releasing it, she drew back, her hands clasped at her breast, a posture usual with her when excited.

“You have saved all our lives; we can never repay you!”

At this moment Mrs. Robinson appeared at the head of the stairs.

"Hester, Hester, what is wrong?" she cried. Then as the girl explained, "I was in the room above the kitchen, and naught did I hear till the shot was fired."

Hester turned to Cochise, who stood looking down at his fallen foe, with stern bitterness in every feature.

"I have staunched his wound, Cochise, but he must be carried to the settle, and not left here."

"Mam'selle," said the young Indian slowly, "is it that you forgive him?"

"I fear not," said Hester rather sadly. "But a moment ago I hated him deeply, yet now that he is suffering, it is different. Were he a hundred times my enemy, I should aid him now."

By the time the wounded man had been laid upon the couch in the parlour half-a-dozen sturdy scouts arrived at the house, discovering to their great chagrin that all need for haste was over. Cochise's story was a simple one. When half a mile away he had seen the light in the garret window, and had responded at a pace which brought him to the Robinson house only a few moments after the arrival of the Tories. The fact that the parlour door was open had enabled him to see all that passed within the hall; and he had waited only till Hester was beyond reach of the shot before firing.

It was now decided that Cochise should remain

on guard throughout the night in case of renewed attack; and several of the scouts agreed to join him in his vigil by the fire. Having assured themselves that the young Tory's wound was not dangerous, there remained nothing for Mrs. Robinson and the girls but to go to bed, and this, despite their weariness, they were loath to do.

An hour later, when all the house was still, Cochise, walking noiselessly back and forth in the dimly lighted hall, saw something small and dark, the size of a knot of ribbon, lying at the foot of the staircase. Pausing, he knelt to examine it. It was a bunch of faded blue-bells which had fallen from Hester's gown. He raised the flowers with reverent fingers, touching them softly as if he feared to harm them, a look of strange tenderness upon his dark face.

Another man had stood that day with blue-bells in his hands, and in his heart only mockery and a cruel purpose. But *this* man, with the stain of a conquered race upon him, gave lowliest homage in his very touch.

Cochise gently thrust the flowers into his deer-skin jacket, and resumed his silent watch.

CHAPTER IX

AS FOE TO FOE

ONCE outside the house Nathan Bennett lost not a second, but springing to the saddle, dashed at a mad gallop for the western woods. The unborn suspicion which had crossed his mind at Hester's words had leaped into full life, and over his soul swept a hot surge of hope and fear. If Ezra Robinson had ridden northward he had gone on a traitor's purpose; he had ridden to meet the enemy. For if the enemy came, he must come from the north; and although the American scouts as yet knew nothing of his approach, still, if this man were in communication with the British, the news would naturally reach him first. Furthermore, Stark and his force were momentarily expecting Burgoyne's advance, and this defection of Ezra Robinson's seemed to prove that their waiting was not in vain. One purpose alone swayed Nathan Bennett: to overtake the traitor before he reached the enemy's lines, and by this means thwart his treason!

Upon reaching the woods the young man leaped to the ground, tore off the hat and wig and suit of

homespun that had formed his disguise; and hiding them in a hollow beneath a pile of branches and dead leaves, stood forth in the uniform of a Continental captain. Having tightened his saddle-girth and examined his pistols he left the shelter of the overhanging boughs, and galloped across the meadow. Before him stretched the winding road, white beneath the moon. Pausing only long enough to observe the mark of fresh hoof-prints in the dust, he gave his horse free rein, and leaning forward in the saddle, saw tree and rock and rough pine fence spin past him like ghosts, as his horse flew forward like a bird.

While the rider's eyes kept a sharp lookout on all sides, his thoughts persisted in rehearsing the events of the past few days; and especially in lingering on an incident of which he was far from proud. Knowing well after his meeting with Cochise the night before that he must either take the Indian into his confidence, or abandon at once his proposed enterprise, he chose the less difficult alternative. As the Indian was passing the Tavern that afternoon Nathan Bennett called him in, and after mentioning his suspicion of Ezra Robinson's treachery, gave his motives for visiting the Robinson house in disguise. Cochise heard the explanation through without a comment, but when it was finished he gave the young captain a searching look, exclaiming:

"M'sieu', what is it that you will do?"

As this question was difficult to answer, Nathan Bennett remained silent, and after waiting a sufficiently long time the Indian continued:

"I, too, have thought that M'sieu' Robinson deals not fairly. What then? You think the same; you go to prove it. You lay a snare and catch him. Is that fair, M'sieu'? The Council, they will hang him, and the rest will suffer too; Mam'selle Hester, and——"

"No! no! no!" Nathan Bennett interrupted impatiently, "you do not understand me; no one else shall suffer. When I have proved this thing, I will order him to leave the country, under pain of arrest. You are as loyal as I, and you too must wish this man to work no further harm. What I ask of you is this: that you tell no one what I have told you, and that you will not hinder my plans."

Looking the young man full in the face, the Indian answered slowly:

"Listen to me! M'sieu'! Shall all suffer for one? If you do as you speak, it is well; and I promise to say no word; but if to those who do no harm you bring sorrow, no pity will I have, and I will deal with you as with the panther who slays not for defence, but for the love to kill!"

He drew himself up proudly, his white teeth set, his dark eyes hard and glittering; transformed by the strength of his anger.

Nathan Bennett turned hot with wrath at the boldness of the Indian's answer, and his hand leaped to his sword-hilt; but restraining himself in time, he said firmly:

"It is agreed, then. You have given your word; I have given mine. That is sufficient."

And thus the interview ended.

The memory of it clung to Nathan Bennett with troublesome persistence, as he galloped onward. Not only had it been humiliating to know that the Indian had detected his disguise, and bitterly degrading to be forced to confide in him, but his pride revolted at the imperious answer that Cochise had given. He tried to fling from him the remembrance of the scene, and turned his thoughts to the need of the moment.

As he advanced northward the country became more rugged; now he was on the high crest of a hill; now in the valley below. Stretches of dense forest alternated with open farmland; with here and there a lonely dwelling.

When, as nearly as he could judge, he had travelled about six miles, the road, plunging over a sharp hill-crest, dipped abruptly to the bank of the Walloomsac, and vanished in its swift waters. Here, then, was the fording-place.

"Can we swim it, Catamount?" said Nathan Bennett, patting the neck of his grey horse.

Catamount, named for Captain Fay's tavern,

answered with an eager snort, and without an instant's hesitation plunged into the rapid stream. His rider, with a firm grasp on the rein, kept his eyes on the swirling water, which leaped in a twinkling to the stirrups, then climbed steadily upward till it broke in little eddies about the horse's mane, for the river, swollen by recent rains, was higher than usual.

They reached the shore in safety, mounted the sharply inclined brink, and were on the road again. Hard to the right a great hill, dark with woods, rose a sheer four hundred feet above the river.

"What a hill! What a country!" murmured Nathan Bennett, looking up at it. "No wonder men are strong and fearless who live amid such scenery. Will Burgoyne send troops to such a place, where even the very rocks will fight against them? 'Tis a fitting spot for a second Marathon!"

When ten miles more lay behind, he began to look about him anxiously, for it seemed full time for the object of his search to come in sight. He halted long enough on the summit of the nearest hill to complete a sharp scrutiny of the road below. Suddenly, as his eyes reached a certain point, he made an exclamation, and thrust the spurs so fiercely into Catamount's side that the animal plunged heavily. Flinging caution to the winds, Nathan reached the foot of the rough slope in a

dangerously short time, and wheeling abruptly out of the highway, leaped the fence at the road-side, and bore to the left across the meadow. His intention was to intercept Ezra Robinson by taking a short cut through the piece of woods that fringed the field. Less than a half a mile beyond the point where he had left it the road curved sharply to the left, and by this means he could overtake the man he had followed so long. He felt a sense of almost savage delight at the thought of success so near his grasp.

Before long he reached a little clearing where the moon shone in brightly through the border of tall pines. He checked his horse, drew out his watch, and held its open dial to the moonlight. The hands pointed to half-past ten. He was now so near the road that he already found himself listening for the approaching of hoofs. His quick ear, indeed, soon caught the faint sound of a horse's feet. The time had come! Whatever was done now, must be done with caution and with speed. Leaping from the saddle, he took Catamount by the bridle, and advanced slowly and stealthily toward the road. The fence that bordered it was but fifty yards away, but every yard was trebled at such a pace.

He had gone but half the distance when he heard a rustling in the thicket near by. The sound was not repeated, and he quickly decided that it was

either his own fancy or the wind among the leaves. Between him and the fence was a wide ditch; he measured it with his eye, then vaulting into the saddle, gave his horse a low word of encouragement. Catamount, worthy of his name, cleared the ditch at a leap, bounded over the low fence, and halted in the grass of the way-side. Nathan Bennett looked with exultant eyes at the bend in the road not ten yards distant, round which his foe must come.

A minute, two minutes, passed in a silence broken only by the heavy breathing of the horse and the sighing of the wind in the pines. Then there plunged into sight a brown mare, grey with dust and foam, yet still held to an unsteady gallop by the man that rode her—Ezra Robinson.

Nathan Bennett wheeled his horse into the road, directly in the traitor's path, and wrenching his pistol from his belt, pointed it full at the man before him, crying in a voice that echoed through the stillness :

“ Stop where you are! Not one inch further shall you stir to-night, till you declare your errand! ”

For a minute no answer followed; while the two men gazed into each other's faces, a look of triumph and scorn upon the one, astonishment and baffled purpose on the other.

At length Ezra Robinson gasped :

“ What mean you, Captain Bennett? What is your purpose? Why do you stop me thus? ”

Lowering the pistol, but still holding it in readiness, Nathan Bennett, with scorn unspeakable in his eyes, made stern answer.

“ Mr. Robinson, all deceit, all pretence, is swept away from between us. Your purpose is known to me! Urged on by doubts of your loyalty, and determined to discover whether or not you were true to our cause, I went last night in disguise to your house. *I* was the unknown Tory. *I* was Richard Farlow! ”

The effect of these words upon Ezra Robinson was fearful. The wonder in his face gave way to anger that was almost fiendish.

“ You! ” he gasped, “ you! Richard Farlow! ” He paused, choked by his fury.

“ I have told the truth, ” said the young man. “ I have used what seemed unfair means, but no other way was open to me. I could suspect, but I could not prove unless—I should play the part that I did. I used deceit to detect the deceiver. ”

“ You lied to me! ” cried Ezra Robinson fiercely between set teeth. “ A thing no honourable man would do. By what dishonourable means you have spied out whither I went— ”

“ How I discovered your plans is not needful to tell, ” interrupted Nathan Bennett hurriedly, fearful lest blame should fall upon Hester. “ Suffi-

cient it is that I have followed and overtaken you. You need not try to hide your purpose from me; it stands revealed. Mr. Robinson, I demand those papers."

Ezra Robinson paid no heed to these words.

"Hester alone knew the secret," he said as if to himself. Then a strange light coming into his face, "Miscreant that you are!" he burst out furiously: "You forced Hester to betray this thing; you deceived her into telling you my purpose." And before the other could break in: "Her beauty caught your fancy, did it? You imagined once her father was out of your path, she would prove an easy prey. You thought this pretty wild-flower of the woods was for *your* grasp, did you? You shall never have her, my fine fellow; she is too fair a maid for a man that bears a shameful secret!"

The words struck Nathan Bennett like a blow. Even in the white moonlight he turned whiter still.

"I pass over the insult you have given me," he replied, restraining himself with an effort. "Of Hester I will not speak. Her name is too sacred to be mentioned here, for she, at least, is a patriot, *though her father is a traitor!*"

With a cry of passion Ezra Robinson tore his pistol from the holster and fired point-blank at his accuser. Owing to his trembling hand, the shot

went wide of the mark, while the man at whom it was aimed sat silent and contemptuous. A moment of perfect stillness followed this mad act. Then there was a low rustling in the bushes, and a man, musket in hand, sprang into the road, and seized Catamount's bridle-rein; while another, emerging from the same hiding-place, flung himself upon Nathan Bennett, and sought to wrest the pistol from his grasp. The young soldier, struggling fiercely, found the number of his assailants suddenly increased, and himself almost borne from the saddle. With a bayonet at his breast and the stern cry of "Surrender!" in his ears, he was forced to submit, and springing to the ground, stood surrounded by a dozen men, with the foreign accent and the scarlet coats of Hessians.

Looking over his shoulder he saw that his enemy had not been spared. Five feet away stood Ezra Robinson, flushed and indignant, a carefully guarded prisoner. Fate, for once impartial, had dealt them the same destiny.

The Hessians now seized the two, and dragging them into a thicket hard by, proceeded to search them at their leisure; accompanying the process with gestures and exclamations in German and broken English. Captain Bennett's watch was received with delight, and a long dispute was held as to who should possess the coveted article. The young soldier calmly submitted to the search,

but when the men laid hands on Ezra Robinson he flung them from him, and pulling the papers from his coat, demanded an interview with the commander.

“How dare you subject me to such treatment?” thundered he, addressing himself to a tall Hessian with a huge pistol, who appeared to be the leader. “I am no crazy rebel like this fellow,” with a vindictive glance at Nathan Bennett. “Take me instantly to Colonel Baum. I have news of great value.”

The tall Hessian simply blinked at him, and Ezra’s rage broke forth afresh:

“Don’t you hear me, you blockhead? Where is Colonel Baum? I must see him immediately!”

This second tirade had some results. The prisoners were led across an open field and into a stretch of pine forest, where at a distance of a mile from the road appeared a hastily constructed camp. In an open space protected on three sides by trees, and looking over a wide meadow, several tents were pitched, and a fire of brushwood threw its red light over the little glade, drowning the pale radiance of the August moonlight. To the largest of these tents the prisoners were conducted, and the tall Hessian, drawing aside the canvas curtain, announced their presence to the officer within, by muttering something in German.

There rose to meet them a man wearing the scar-

let uniform and handsomely chased sword of a British officer. His face was both kindly and intelligent. He advanced a step, and looked inquiringly at Ezra Robinson, who stood foremost.

“The guard informs me, sir, that you were captured upon the highway, and that you have news to deliver to me.”

Barely waiting till the words were finished, Ezra Robinson tore the papers from his cloak, and flung them upon the rude table.

“Your Excellency,” he cried, his voice shaking with excitement, “I have ridden nigh twenty miles to put these in your hands. Their value is immeasurable. I am no rebel turncoat. I am with the English heart and soul, and have been, ever since Burgoyne took Ticonderoga. Before that I was fool enough to be dragged into their lawless plans and received the reward I merited—degradation and dishonour. I’m done with the cause forever. But the papers. Colonel Baum, you have Stark’s army in your hands by holding these.”

He poured the words out with nervous rapidity, his face wild with emotion.

The British Colonel regarded him attentively, then took up one of the papers and begun to read it. Suddenly he made an exclamation, and laid the paper down. As he did so, his eyes met those of Nathan Bennett, standing with bound arms but proudly held head, near the door of the tent. The

young man's face was full of stern passion, and his whole form seemed tense with suppressed rage. Ezra Robinson turned also; and the two prisoners, thus brought face to face, glared furiously at each other. The desire for revenge got mastery in Ezra Robinson's breast.

"Colonel Baum," he cried, "this man is a spy, despite the uniform he wears. Last night he came to me, disguised as a Tory, and tried to win from me by deception those papers that you hold. Here is the warrant he gave, signed by Lord Howe himself. Isn't that evidence enough to hang him?"

And he thrust the document into Baum's hands.

"It might be condemning under other circumstances," replied the Colonel thoughtfully, "but at the time of his visit you were not holding office under the crown, or even openly attached to it, and these facts would prevent his seizure as a spy. What have you to say in regard to this accusation?" he added turning to Nathan Bennett.

"I would say to Mr. Robinson," the young man answered with a proud smile, "that were *he* prisoner to the Americans, *I* might produce some disparaging evidence in *his* behalf. He doubtless knows the old adage concerning glass houses. As he has himself produced several excellent likenesses of Mr. Allen's handwriting, I should advise him to let the matter alone."

A look of utter consternation overspread Ezra Robinson's face at these closing words, but quickly recovering himself he assumed an expression of indifference and remained silent.

Colonel Baum stood considering, then spoke rapidly to Ezra Robinson:

"It is better that we finish our interview alone, sir," he said politely. "Therefore I will have the guard escort you to another tent where I will presently join you, and reward you for your loyalty."

When Baum and the young captain were left together, the former with secret admiration for his prisoner's self-control, drew near him, and touching the rope that bound the young man's arms spoke in a courteous undertone:

"Surely such restraint is unnecessary. One gentleman should trust another, even though they are enemies. If you will give me your word not to escape, you shall be unbound."

"I thank you for your courtesy, Colonel Baum," said Nathan Bennett gratefully. "I will give you my word not to leave this tent during our present interview. More than that I cannot promise. It is my duty to escape if I can."

"I accept your terms," said Baum, bowing; "and I understand your scruples. It is *my duty* to keep you under safe guard. At night you shall be bound, but not now."

With these words he took a knife from the table and cut the rope round the prisoner's arms.

"Now," he continued, taking up the papers he had laid down, "you doubtless know whether these are true or false. Will you give me your opinion in regard to them?"

"Colonel Baum, I regret, in view of your clemency, that I cannot answer your question, except that I may say that the number of Stark's force is not under-estimated in those papers. I must refuse to speak further."

Baum made a gesture of disappointment.

"I wish you could find it in your mind to tell me whether Stark has any scouts on the Cambridge road?"

Nathan Bennett bit his lip, but did not reply.

Seeing that this course of inquiry was useless, Colonel Baum, after a short pause, continued:

"As to your visit in disguise, did he tell the truth?"

"Colonel Baum," returned the other firmly, "I had a suspicion and I sought to prove it. I wore a disguise, but wore my uniform under it. A spy I am not!"

"I believe you," was the answer. "In my estimation this paper is no evidence against you. I shall not betray your confidence despite your refusal to answer my questions, nor do I think you a spy."

Nathan Bennett flushed with gratitude.

"I shall not forget your kindness, Colonel Baum," he cried warmly. "If ever you are in my place,—a prisoner in the enemy's hands,—I shall hope to repay you."

Baum smiled.

"It is hardly likely I shall be," he said, "though we can never tell; the fortunes of war are uncertain."

The interview being over, Nathan Bennett, closely guarded, seated himself on a log near the fire, and gazed at the faint fall of the moonlight. The thoughts at war within him were bitterly hard to suppress. The enemy were on the road to Bennington; Stark knew nothing of their approach; Stark's numbers were betrayed through the perfidy of a traitor, and he himself, unable to give aid to his fellow-patriots, was a prisoner in the British camp. It was torture.

Meantime Ezra Robinson, throughout his final interview with Baum, had only one thought,—flight. No offer of protection or position could tempt him now, for with the discovery of his treachery there was not a moment's safety within the valley. Long before daybreak, mounted on a fresh horse and bearing with him fifty pounds, the price of his treason, he galloped out of the Hessian camp. Well for him if he could have left behind the burden of a deserted cause!

The night waned, and the sounds of the camp grew hushed. Nathan Bennett, where he lay on the ground between two soldiers, could see the flash of stars above the eastern hill-tops, brighter now the moon was low. The fire was dying into red-gold embers and the wind had sunk to a breath. An hour after midnight there was a trampling of feet in the meadow, and a number of dark forms could be seen approaching the fire. Someone threw on a log and the flames sprang up afresh. It was a scouting party, just returned from a march across country, and with them several prisoners. Nathan Bennett, raising himself on one elbow, gazed intently at the faces revealed by the fire-light; then started with surprise, for among the prisoners he was sure he had seen Neil Barton.

At length the noises died away and he fell asleep. When he awoke again, all things were wrapped in a mist cloud, white and chill; and the stars were fading into the grey of dawn. He thought how carelessly he had galloped through the night, never dreaming of capture; and the longing for freedom came over him with passionate force. For a moment he pulled hard at the rope about his arms, then sank back despairing. Beneath those fading stars an army slept, unconscious of the coming foe. Oh, for one hour of freedom!

CHAPTER X

A SPRIG OF EVERGREEN

THE light of a candle shining full in her face awoke Hester from the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. Starting up, she beheld her mother fully dressed, standing by the bedside. For a moment the girl stared at her in the bewilderment of sudden awakening; then, as her mind recalled the scenes of the evening, she cried wildly:

“ Oh, mother, have the Tories come again? ”

“ No, no, Hester,” said Mrs. Robinson quietly. “ There is no need for alarm; your father has returned, and I came to wake you, for he must be gone by daybreak.”

“ Gone by daybreak! ” echoed Hester, springing up, and beginning to dress hurriedly, while Polly, already out of bed, tried to clasp the buckles of her shoes with trembling fingers.

Mrs. Robinson put the candle on the bureau, and stood by silent, a look so troubled upon her face that Hester felt a sudden fear.

“ But, mother, there is nothing wrong? ” she demanded. “ Father is in no trouble? ”

Despite herself the question rose to her lips.

"He has told me naught," her mother answered. "I can see something burdens his mind. But make haste," she added, for Hester had paused in lacing her bodice. "There is no time to be lost."

It all seemed a dream; the sudden awakening, the dressing by candlelight, the secret fear at her heart. Hester stole down the stairs and into the kitchen. Her father was standing on the hearth, his hands locked behind him, his eyes intent upon the floor; the posture of a man overwhelmed by some great crisis, knowing not where to look for aid. With a cry in which joy and fear mingled, she flung her arms about his neck, then started back, for the face he turned to her was strangely haggard. He seemed ten years older than when he parted from her not nine hours before.

"Father, father, what has happened?" cried Hester imploringly, holding his hand in hers.

He drew away from her and sat down at the table, leaning one arm upon it. He seemed not to have heard her question.

"Has anyone been here asking for me?" cried he, at length, looking up.

"No one, save Richard Farlow. Father, you will forgive me for breaking my promise, when you see how great was the need of it."

She told him of her interview with the stranger,

and of the urgency of his mission. "Did he find you, father? You rode so fast, I was sure he could not overtake you."

"Nevertheless he did, and delivered his message," said her father, rising, his eyes gleaming with the remembrance of the scene.

Mrs. Robinson and Polly had entered, but he did not heed them. He began to pace up and down the room, then turned abruptly:

"Look you, Hester, you may as well know the whole of the matter. The errand on which I rode last night was both dangerous and perplexing. But now I must go a longer journey, and I must not delay an hour. Therefore, Charlotte," he added, turning to his wife, "make haste, and get me something to eat, while I go upstairs for some papers."

He mounted to his room and looked anxiously about him, fearful lest it had been disturbed during his absence. A glance sufficed to show that everything was in its usual place. To light a fire on the hearth was the work of a moment; and hastily producing the papers bearing British signatures, he flung them into the flames, and with a fierce light in his eyes watched them crumble into ashes. When the last sheet had fallen into grey fragments he rose with a low laugh. Neither Ira Allen nor any of the Council could hang him now.

There was no definite plan in his mind, save that

he must flee to the British lines; not to Burgoyne, that was too near the scene of his treason; but through the wilderness to Howe's army at New York. With a good horse, plenty of money, food enough in his saddle-bags to last for three days, and a musket and well-filled powder-horn, he had a fair chance of reaching White Plains in safety.

But his thoughts were not all selfish. Anxiety for his family oppressed him. What would become of them when he was gone? Who would manage the farm? Worst possibility of all, suppose the farm should be taken from them! He knew how rigidly the Council carried out their new-made law. But he would not think of this as a probability. It *could* not happen. If men were stern, they were also just. And if worst befell, there was Stephen Fay. Strange, that in this, the greatest exigency of his life, Ezra Robinson should have looked for aid to the man he had so long hated. He must leave his family for a time, but the parting would not be for long. A few months; a year at most, and they would be united; would live in prosperity under English protection. And then the war would end; it was only a matter of time; the Colonies would be conquered, and King George would once more reign in undisputed sovereignty.

These thoughts occupied him as he drew from the wall the remaining papers entrusted to him by

the Council. He put them into his coat, then sat down at the table and wrote a letter which he sealed and directed to Mark Ellis. In it he referred with purposed vagueness to the discovery of their plot and the necessity of his own immediate flight. Having finished, he gave a last hurried glance around the room, took up the candle, and went out into the hall. There was yet an hour before dawn, for the clock-hands had not reached the hour of three. It was very dark. The moon had been down since one. A better time for escape could not have been chosen.

When he re-entered the kitchen the hastily prepared meal of bacon and corn-bread was ready. He ate in silence, so absorbed that he did not notice his wife's furtive glances, or Hester's wistful eyes.

Ten minutes went by; Ezra Robinson rose.

"Charlotte," he said, "it may be months before I return. If you need help, you know of whom to ask it."

His wife seemed about to speak, but he continued rapidly:

"I can tell you no more. My errand requires great secrecy. For heaven's sake, don't hinder me! I must be miles from here by daybreak! Now, good-bye."

He held her in his arms, with him, an unusual tenderness; kissed Polly, and taking up his musket and heavy saddle-bags, turned to his daughter.

"Put on your cloak and come out to the barn with me, Hester. I have something to say to you."

Mrs. Robinson stood pale and trembling, unable to speak. He could not trust himself to look at her again. Polly had begun to cry. Hester wrapped herself in her cloak and followed him in silence. Once within the barn, Ezra Robinson struck a flint and lighted a small cone-shaped lantern.

Bidding Hester wait below, he climbed to the loft, and filled his powder-horn from a keg concealed in the hay. As she listened to his footsteps Hester struggled hard with the fear that was overpowering her. What did it mean, this strange home-coming; this sudden leave-taking? It was no suspicion of the truth that troubled her,—she never thought of suspecting him,—but a terrible dread, oppressive as it was vague. She perceived instinctively that all was not right, and she struggled hard to comprehend the matter.

Her father, returning, set the lantern down, and led his horse into the light to fasten the saddle-bags in place. This done, he took both Hester's hands in his.

"Child," he said, and in his voice was all the tenderness of farewell, "it may be months before I return. Don't lose hope! All will go well with you, I know. But if by any chance trouble comes,

I shall hear of it; do not fear. Keep this until there is need for spending it."

He put some money into her hand; and she saw the gold flash in the light.

"Here is something to be given Captain Ellis," he continued, hastily handing her a sealed letter. "He will be here before night. Guard it safely."

He bent over and kissed her tenderly.

"Hester," he said, "Neil Barton was taken prisoner to-day. He went out with a small scouting-party and 'tis reported that he was captured by some of Burgoyne's Indians. I apprehend no trouble for him, however; he will soon be safe again. He loves you, Hester. With him you will have a happy life."

She looked up, startled, into his face.

"But, father—" she faltered.

"Listen to me, child; he has both wealth and intelligence. 'Tis far better for you to marry him than wed some roving upstart of whom you know nothing. There, I have finished. That you will obey me, I know."

He did not wait for an answer, but extinguished the lantern, and led the horse through the open door.

Hester followed without speaking. The sky overhead was dark, but the air had a peculiar chill; the stars had lost their brightness, and from a distance came the crowing of a cock. The dark

lines of the house rose up between them and the eastern sky.

Suddenly over Ezra Robinson there swept, like a torrent of waters, the knowledge of all he had lost. The fear that had filled his soul faded into nothingness, but his whole being cried out against the fate that his own hands had wrought. It was not remorse; rather a shrinking from the inevitable; perhaps a faint, far shadowing of what Judas felt when he knew that no power on earth could efface the awfulness of his deed.

With no sound, save the light fall of the horse's hoofs on the grass, Hester and her father made their way through the dark orchard. Upon reaching the meadow west of the house Ezra Robinson mounted, and bending from the saddle, kissed her a last good-bye. Her sweet face upturned to him was white and piteous. With a low sob her arms fell from about his neck, and she covered her face with her hands that she might not see him go. At the edge of the woods he turned in the saddle and cast a last look at the dim outlines of his home; as he gazed an exclamation broke from his lips, and without another pause, he wheeled his horse into the sheltering forest. A wide band of ashen light was spanning the eastern sky. The dawn had come! And he fled from it as from a foe.

When Hester lifted her head from her hands,

she was leaning against one of the orchard trees, alone in the chill mist and the shadows. Shivering, though more with dread than cold, she began to retrace her steps toward the house. The same appalling fear hung round her like a curtain, shutting out all hope. She began to quicken her pace till she was almost running, as if from some pursuer. Then her sobs, long-repressed, broke forth, and she hastened on, scarcely seeing whither she went; the tears streaming down her face.

Despite an occasional flutter of hope, the day that followed was wearily long. Her mother's troubled face and Polly's eager questions, added to her own anxiety, made it impossible for Hester to keep her mind upon her work. How could one spin and weave and stitch, with a heart full of misgivings!

About six o'clock Hester went again to the orchard in search of a web of linen left to bleach on the grass. When her errand was finished, she lingered on the door-step, looking up at the lines of cloud. She fancied them the smoke of some great battle. Then she remembered that the powder-horn she had snatched from above the dresser the night before was half-empty, and she determined to fill it.

A few minutes later she entered the dusky coolness of the barn with the powder-horn in her hand, and springing up the ladder to the mow, knelt

down in the hay, at the further end of the dim loft, and removed the cover of the hidden keg. It took both time and patience to reach down and scoop up the powder, and Hester, half-buried in the hay, was flushed and panting when her task was done. Once during the process she imagined she heard a light footstep below, but when she paused to listen all was quiet, and she thought herself mistaken. Now she rose, and loosely tossing the hay into place, slung the powder-horn over her shoulders and groped her way toward the ladder.

The loft was lighted only by a small window high in the wall, thickly curtained with cobwebs. It was bright enough, however, for Hester to see a folded paper lying on the topmost step of the ladder. She caught it up eagerly, thinking it something her father had left. Perhaps this would explain the mystery of his sudden leave-taking. She stood beneath the window and held the paper to the light.

It was folded like a letter, but not sealed, being fastened by a strip of birch-bark. Her own name was written across one side, but she saw it was not her father's handwriting. With quick fingers she tore away the bark fastening, and opened the letter. A sprig of evergreen slipped from the fold in the page and fell into her hand. For a moment she regarded it curiously; then she read:

“I can keep silence no longer concerning that which fills my whole heart and soul.—Hester, I love you! Even though you should be offended, I must say it. Hester, I love you! I love you! I love you!—I am a prisoner in the enemy’s hands, but if it be God’s will I shall escape in time to fight with my countrymen.—When I return I will tell you things that greatly concern you, things that you must know.—The scout who bears this to you, bears also to Stark the news of Baum’s advance. May the God of Battles give us victory! Hester, I send you this sprig of evergreen—emblem of the cause we both hold dear.—Will you not keep it, and pray for that cause, and for one who needs your prayers?—May God bless you, these days and all days!

“N. B.”

With swift-coming breath and hands that trembled with excitement, Hester read the letter to its close. At the mention of Baum’s approach she gave a startled exclamation, but when she had finished, another emotion stirred her. Her eyes were shining softly; her cheeks were a warm crimson; she gazed into the shadowy depths of the loft with a look entranced.

“Nathan Bennett,” she murmured below her breath, as if the name had magic power.

All thoughts of the coming enemy, all dread of the future vanished. A great peace, a great joy, a great ecstasy, filled her soul. There in the dim loft she was living the supreme moment of her life.

He loved her, and all the strength of her nature, before untouched by passion, leaped up responsive.

She read the letter again and again, the colour playing across her face. She touched the sprig of evergreen with tender fingers; her grey eyes, soft and star-like, reflecting the splendid passion of awakened feeling. To her a sprig of evergreen had been ever dear, as the emblem of the Green Mountain Boys, the badge of Ethan Allen's men. How much more precious now that Nathan Bennett had sent it as a token of his love!

She could not have told how long she lingered in the old loft, careless how time slipped past, content with her new-found joy. When at length she tucked the treasured letter into her dress, and climbed down the dark ladder, the sun had set in a bank of blue-black clouds, and the faint boom of thunder was like the echo of far-away guns. To Hester, in her present state of exaltation, it mattered little whether the storm came or not; the sunshine in her heart was changeless.

And yet, halfway to the house she paused abruptly, and her clasped hands went to her breast in an agitated gesture. Her eyes lost their happy light.

“It cannot be,” she cried.

With wild haste, she drew forth the hidden letter, and once more read it through.

“‘Even though you should be offended with me, I must say it.—I am a prisoner in the enemy’s hands.’”

Again her eyes fell to the signature.

“‘N. B.’ Suppose it were not Nathan Bennett after all. Suppose it were Neil Barton!”

Despair seized her. She scanned the letter again and again, though it had grown so dark that the writing was but a blur; yet still the ruthless conviction grew upon her.—It was not Nathan Bennett who had written the letter; it was Neil Barton. The handwriting did not help her; she had never seen Neil’s handwriting. They had lived near each other from childhood; and there had been no need for letters.

Throughout the next two hours Hester’s heart strove against this conviction. She tried to be positive that Nathan had written it; but was equally positive of his rival. Had not her father said that Neil was a prisoner? Nathan, so far as she knew, was not. And had not Neil reason to think that he would offend her if he made mention of his love? These facts were indisputable. As for the sprig of evergreen, either one might have sent it. Nathan Bennett was a captain in Herrick’s Rangers, and Neil Barton was also a member of that regiment—a lieutenant in the Bennington company commanded by Captain Dewey. The substitution of Neil for Nathan as writer of the

letter made a cruel wreck of the happy hour spent in the old loft.

The news of Baum's advance, following so soon upon the attack of the Tories, put Mrs. Robinson into a flutter of fear. When bed-time came she went, candle in hand, from window to window, fastening the wooden shutters close against assault, while the girls drew the heavy oaken bars across the doors. As Hester turned to ascend the stairway a slight sound caught her ear; a sound so low that it might have been either a moan or the soughing of the wind. She set the candle on the newel-post and listened. In a moment the sound was repeated; at once a moan and a cry. It came from the porch! Hester waited no longer; unbaring the door, she caught up the candle and holding it so that the light fell far over the steps, cried in a low voice:

“What is wrong? Who is there?”

The next instant she sprang back startled; a man swayed out of the darkness, and caught at the railing for support. He had bound a handkerchief about his left arm, but the blood crept from under the rude bandage, making a dark line on the fringed buckskin of his sleeve.

“Is this the Robinson house?” he gasped in a faint voice. “Don't you know *me*, Isaac Clark?”

With a cry of recognition, Hester caught his unwounded arm, and with the aid of her mother

and Polly, assisted him up the steps and into the hall.

They brought in the settle from the kitchen, covered it with a cloak, and made him lie down upon it. He was weak with pain and loss of blood. Mrs. Robinson held a hot drink to his lips, Polly fanned him with her apron, and Hester wound a scarf around his arm, while he lay back, half-unconscious. He was Isaac Clark of Bennington, one of the most trusted of Stark's scouts. Presently his eyes opened, and a look of wild anxiety shot across his face.

"I'm better now," he cried. "'Twas the bleeding weakened me. I think I've been wandering round for an hour, not knowing where I was, but trying to reach the light."

He rested a moment, then went on.

"I was shot nigh two hours ago half a mile east of this house. For an hour or so I lay unconscious, then I tried to reach you here. 'Twas Tories shot me; Captain Adams' cursed crew."

Suddenly he gripped the back of the settle and pulled himself up till he was half-standing.

"Haven't you a horse I can take? I must carry my news to Stark. *Baum is coming!* I can cling to the horse somehow—Bennington must be alarmed at all costs. Great heavens, the news should have reached them two hours ago, but God knows, I tried my best!"

Quick daring leaped into Hester's eyes. She sprang to her feet, and stood before him.

"Bennington shall not go unalarmed! You cannot ride as you are. I have a horse that will reach the camp in ten minutes. 'Ti' can outrun all the Tories that ever breathed. Give *me* the message! *I* will take it!"

CHAPTER XI

ON THE VERGE OF BATTLE

THE words rang through the room like the clear tones of a bugle. All stared at her, spell-bound with amazement; her dauntless courage thrilled them, but Isaac Clark knew the grim reality of what she would undertake.

"Miss Robinson," cried Isaac Clark, "you cannot do it. There are Tories between us and the town. Do you think I would let them shoot you, as they did me?"

Hester's clear eyes did not waver; whatever fear lurked in the depth of her heart she repressed with all her strength.

"I shall not take the road," she answered quickly. "I know a path through the fields. It is moonlight. I can easily find it. Once on the southward road to Stark's camp, I shall not meet any Tories. We are but wasting time in talking. For the sake of the army, give me the message now."

Mrs. Robinson, sobbing wildly, clung to Hester with despairing force.

"You shall not go! You will not go!" she cried, in anguished appeal.

Hester gently disengaged herself from her mother's grasp.

"Mother, mother, I shall come back safely, do not fear. The Tories will not linger long within a mile of Bennington. Now," she cried to the scout, "is the paper ready?"

Isaac Clark sank back upon the settle. Reluctantly he drew out the bit of crumpled paper, whose value was so priceless, and put it in her hands.

"I am forced to it at last," he said slowly, "but my heart misgives me. I pray the danger be not so great as I think. Give the horse a free rein and keep close watch. You will meet Stark's outposts between here and the camp. Here is a pass signed by Ira Allen, that may serve you well. And may God protect you!"

For a moment her warm young fingers lay in the scout's rough hand, then, turning, she slipped the message and the pass into her bodice, where for security she had previously hidden the letter to Captain Ellis. Little did she guess what varied contents lay within them. Flinging a long cloak over her shoulders and drawing the hood over her head for protection in case of storm, Hester stepped out of the lighted room into the August night. She groped her way swiftly through the dark barn, flung the bridle and saddle on Ti, and

slipped into the holster the pistol she had brought. As her quick fingers fastened buckle and girth, her mind travelled ceaselessly the road she must take, picturing with the vividness of high-strung fancy every rock and thicket where a foe might hide. When all was ready, she led Ti to the front gate, and mounted.

At a swift canter she crossed the fields to the southward, while she watched breathlessly for the flash of a musket in the woods she soon must enter. They were very close at hand. She could see the curving road, a white ribbon among the dusky trees; and her heart-beats quickened. The knowledge of surrounding danger pressed hard upon her. That white band of road seemed as perilous as if it had been edged with loaded cannon. Too dauntless to turn back, she tightened her grasp on the bridle-rein, drew out the pistol, and put Ti to a gallop, expecting to hear the whistle of a bullet among the trees. But the steady beat of the horse's hoofs alone awoke the night. Mount Anthony rose in front of her; a wood-crowned summit, black against the moonlit sky. To the left she could see the lights of Bennington; one which stood apart and shone more brightly than the rest was the Catamount Tavern. The Council held their sessions late into the night.

So she rode on, her hand on the pistol, her eyes on the line of road. Once a sentry stopped her,

and demanded the countersign. He was one of Herrick's men, for he wore a sprig of evergreen in his cocked hat. She drew out the pass the scout had given her, and he let her go on unquestioned. Where the Mount Anthony road and that from Bennington crossed each other she paused to listen; all was as still as before. Her hope rose high at having eluded the Tories. She began to breathe more freely, though she did not cease to keep close watch. On one side of the road lay thick woods stretching away to the foot of Mount Anthony; on the other, open fields; but on both sides the way was closely bordered by dense thickets where men and horses might hide unseen. Hester, however, felt a growing security in the nearness of the camp; and bending low in the saddle, kept Ti at his swiftest pace.

The road had now become so narrow that it was barely wide enough for two horsemen to ride abreast. On the right-hand side was a thicket of alders and young pines. That which happened, happened quickly. A man leaped from the shelter of the alders and caught at Ti's bridle, crying sternly:

“Halt! Halt! Who rides at such a pace?”

Ti reared and plunged furiously, trying to escape the firm grasp on the rein. Hester, clinging to the saddle, gazed into the face of her captor, with eyes whose fear gave place to recognition.

For the man before her was General Stark. She pushed the hood from her face, and he fell back, astonished, seeing what the uncertain light had prevented his seeing at first, that the rider he had stopped was a woman. Another man emerged from the thicket, and advancing to the General's side, bowed low to Hester. It was Ira Allen, the young Secretary of the Council.

Hester drew the scout's paper from under her cloak.

"General Stark," she cried, "Isaac Clark was on his way to you with this when the Tories shot him. He reached our house wounded, and unable to go further. I took his place. The paper is important. It contains the news of Baum's advance!"

With an exclamation Stark took the paper.

"Just what I have expected!" he cried.

"General," said Ira Allen, "your brave messenger is Miss Hester Robinson, a patriot who does honour to our cause."

He spoke with a generous warmth. General Stark bowed low. Hester, flushing at Ira Allen's praise, slipped out of the saddle, and stood with one arm over the horse's neck; her cloak thrown a little back from her shoulders, her eyes intent on the General's face. Stark, after holding the paper in the fading moonlight in a vain attempt to distinguish the scout's blurred writing, produced

from the bushes a small lantern of punched tin, by whose light he proceeded to read the message.

In the midst of it he paused abruptly:

"How is it, Miss Robinson, that your father did not come with this?" said he, looking fixedly at Hester.

The question was unexpected. Hester, haunted by that vague dread, stood a moment speechless, and then faltered: "He is not here, General, he has gone away."

Seeming not to have noticed her agitation, Stark resumed his reading of the paper, but her hesitation and change of tone were not lost upon Ira Allen. He felt his misgivings confirmed and needed not to be told that Ezra Robinson had fled to escape capture. He blamed himself for not having acted sooner, and secured the man's arrest without waiting for open proof of his guilt. Yet both he and Nathan Bennett had done all that they could to defeat the traitor; and under any other circumstances they would doubtless have accomplished their purpose. Fate had outplayed them by the capture of Nathan Bennett.

Presently Stark looked up. "Baum is on the way to Bennington, Lieutenant Allen," he said gravely. "Our conjectures were not wrong. Still we hardly thought, when we heard to-day that there were Indians this side of Cambridge, that regular troops were behind them. When I sent

out Gregg, I did not imagine he would encounter a detachment of the main force. He may have trouble. Our brigade must march at daybreak to reinforce him if need be. Burgoyne is a good schemer; we must prove ourselves better. The Council should hear of this news at once. Could you not ride to the town and tell them of it and then join me later? They may wish to act at once on this information."

General Stark and Ira Allen had passed the evening in consultation at the Catamount Tavern; and the General had persuaded the young Secretary to spend the night with him at the camp to discuss matters. They had been riding slowly, engaged in eager conversation when they heard behind them the sound of a galloping horse. Instantly at Stark's suggestion they had dismounted, and hidden themselves and their horses in the tangle of bushes by the roadside; while Stark, himself, determined to know the errand which required such speed, had stopped the messenger.

"I think you are right, General. The Council should certainly hear of this at once," said Ira Allen. "When I have seen Miss Robinson safely home, I will stop at the Tavern and acquaint them with the facts. There is need for haste; for there is a storm near."

The storm indeed appeared close at hand. A few thin clouds were scudding across the moon,

whose light had paled to a grey. The wind blew in gusts, and set the leaves to pattering. The thunder came in ominous crashes, at shorter and shorter intervals.

Stark advanced to where Hester stood, and held out his hand, saying:

“ My thanks are indeed inadequate reward for your brave deed. If the men of Vermont be only one whit as brave as the women, we need not fear a hundred Burgoynes.”

Ira Allen had disappeared in the clump of bushes, and he now returned, leading his own horse and the General’s.

“ Lieutenant Allen,” cried Hester eagerly, “ had we not better ride home by way of the village, that you may warn the Council at once? ”

“ It would make a longer ride for you, Miss Robinson, and you must be safely home before the storm breaks,” he returned quickly.

“ Oh, I do not fear the storm,” she said, smiling; “ it will not break for some moments yet.” Then growing grave again, “ And duty before all.”

“ The best way is that which Miss Robinson suggests,” said Stark with decision. “ This is serious news, and should be known at once.”

“ It is decided then,” said Ira Allen gaily, “ and we will race against the steeds of the wind. I will join you at the camp within an hour, General.”

Stark put a foot in the stirrup and sprang up as nimbly as a boy.

"Good-night, Miss Robinson," he said, bowing. "Carry with you my lasting thanks. I can assure you a safe ride homeward and a merry one."

"The General infers that I can make merry whether the sky falls or not," laughed Ira Allen. "Well, we must follow the old proverb: 'Let us eat and drink for to-morrow we die!' which in the language of the time is, 'Let us hope and plan ere Burgoyne shall gobble us,' eh, General?"

Stark laughed, then gave his horse the spur and rode off toward the camp. Ira Allen, helping Hester to mount, sprang into his own saddle, and the two, wheeling their horses, began to retrace at a gallop the road they had so lately travelled. It was a ride wild and dangerous, like a gallop in a dream. The shadows of the coming storm, the fitful gleam of paling moonlight, the thunder, the wind that fluttered their cloaks and tossed the manes of the horses; above all, the knowledge of impending struggle impressed them both with awe. For a mile and more they rode almost in silence, without the merriment that Stark had prophesied.

To Hester it seemed like riding through the air, in the midst of flying cloud-shadows.

"They will take us for a whole troop of cavalry

and imagine Burgoyne has stolen a march on them," said Ira Allen more practically.

They left the gloom of the woods presently and galloped up the village street, their horses' hoofs making loud clatter against the stones of the rain-washed road. Doors and windows were flung open, and lights flashed out in houses that before were dark as they dashed by. At Parson Dewey's house near the church the old minister himself thrust forth a night-capped head, demanding:

"Who are you that ride so fast?"

"Forerunners of Burgoyne, Parson," called out Ira Allen, barely drawing rein. "Be ready to heap anathemas upon them, backed by a few bullets if need be."

"Young man," was the sharp retort, "this is no time for vain jesting. If what you say be true, we must indeed pray for strength to meet the foe."

Past the meeting-house green they galloped, waking the inmates of the Dewey Tavern; past the shadowy churchyard, whose white stones glimmered faintly in the dim light. Beyond the churchyard stood a small house, dark and lonely; no light sprang up in it at their coming. Ira Allen looked at it and sighed. It was the house that had been Ethan Allen's.

"Poor Ethan," said he sadly, "what would he not give to be here now, and take part in the fight! Thank God, he is a prisoner at New York and not

a captive in the hold of that fearful ship, or in chains at Pendennis Castle! And every month we hope to hear of his exchange.”

“ How well I remember,” said Hester, her eyes sparkling at the recollection, “ when Ethan Allen and our Green Mountain Boys met at Uncle Stephen’s two weeks after Lexington and made plans to take Ticonderoga. And how all Bennington cheered him when the fortress was taken. The men were shouting and waving their hats as he rode down the street.”

Her voice had a thrill of pride as she spoke of the hero of the Grants. There was hardly a man or woman in Vermont whose heart-beats would not quicken at the name of Ethan Allen.

They had now reached the foot of the locust-shaded hill, and they reined their panting horses to a halt in front of the Catamount Tavern. Late as it was, a light was burning in one of the upper rooms, showing that at least some of the councillors had not yet retired to slumber.

“ ‘Tis Dr. Fay, you can depend upon it,” laughed Ira Allen. “ He stays up all night. Many’s the time he and I have written till the candles burned out and the daylight came. Awake, ye men of the Catamount Tavern! Come hither, Captain Fay, and hear the news! ”

In a moment the door was opened and Stephen Fay appeared, lantern in hand.

"Is that you, Ira?" he cried upon recognising the riders. "Hester, child, what is wrong? For heaven's sake what brings you here at this hour?"

His voice quivered with apprehension; his face betrayed anxious lines. The sense of loneliness that had been Hester's throughout the day weighed upon her now, and made her look at him with wistful eyes. He was the only one to whom she could turn for help. Ira Allen told their mission in a few words. Stephen Fay heard the news of the enemy's advance without an exclamation. He had momently expected it. But when he heard of Hester's brave deed he took her hand and held it fast; both love and pride in the look with which he regarded her.

Ira Allen gathered up his bridle-rein.

"You will inform the Council of this at once, Captain Fay. We must not linger if we intend to outspeed the storm."

"But you must stay here till it is over," returned Stephen Fay. "The lightning makes it dangerous in these woods."

Ira Allen glanced at the advancing clouds, then shook his head.

"No, no, there is still time before it breaks. I know these storms well. They are deceptive and threaten long before they come. For all that, we dare not delay."

Up the dark hill they rode, breasting it at a gal-

lop. In front of them rose the store-houses, visible only as indistinct forms. The tramp of feet was borne plainly to their ears, and the next instant they were accosted by a sharp "halt" from the nearest sentinel. Ira Allen, laughing boyishly, leaned from the saddle and whispered the countersign, "Ticonderoga."

"You do well to keep close watch, Solomon Walbridge," said he in a low tone. "Some fine night you may cry 'halt' to Baum himself."

"Is that you, Lieutenant Allen?" exclaimed the sentry. "I thought I knew you, but the light was so dim, I could not be sure."

"My name seems of great value," returned the young secretary, an amused smile curling his lips. "It appears that all one needs in these days in order to travel safely through this part of the country is a good musket and the signature of Ira Allen, Esquire, is it not? Stark commands you to let no one by without the countersign. A pass is all very well, but some one clever at the pen might sign my name as nicely as I do. Therefore be watchful and double your guards, if necessary. By the way," he added quickly, "have you heard of any Tories on the Arlington road?"

"Captain Adams' band was reported out earlier in the evening," returned Walbridge. "They must be gone by now."

When they reached an open space in the woods,

they looked eagerly in the direction of the Arlington road. A dark something that might be a group of horsemen was drifting slowly across the fields.

"Which way are they going?" cried Ira Allen. "They are so much a part of the shadows 'tis hard to tell. At any rate we can pass the turn before they reach it, if we make haste."

Hester's eyes shot a daring gleam.

"Let us try," she said. "Suppose we race to the cross-roads. Which will reach it first, you or I?"

She gave Ti the whip and shot away like an arrow, bending low to escape the overhanging branches. Ira Allen touched his horse with the spur and followed her at an equal pace. On, on they flew through the forest twilight, pausing not for hill or hollow. Up the slope beneath the pines, past the mossy spring where treason had been plotted, they sped as swiftly as the clouds above them. The turn in the road was very near. A stone's throw distant they checked their horses.

"There is not a sound to be heard," said Ira Allen, in a whisper. "Shall we venture it?"

That night the mood of each was strangely compounded of gravity and mirth. But playing with danger breeds daring. Hester laughed softly and whispered back:

"If we meet the Tories we must run, brave as

we are; quantity has been known to conquer quality. But I feel sure they have vanished. Let us make a dash for freedom."

They again urged on their horses, but for all their recklessness they held their breath at the thought of being entrapped in that dark place. The brief moments that it took them to pass the dangerous spot were magnified into long minutes of suspense. The turn was far behind them before either spoke.

"Thank God we are safe," said Hester softly.

He echoed her words: "Thank God we are safe."

The woods opened and the ripple of water flowing over stones could be plainly heard. They had reached the little stream near the house. The horses' hoofs rang pleasantly upon the logs of the rude bridge. Above them a light streamed out; a candle shining like a star in its dark setting. Hester turned to Ira Allen.

"I am safely home now, Lieutenant Allen; thanks to your kind protection. I wish I could give you shelter for the night. But I know you cannot stay. At least do not let me keep you longer from your duty."

They had both dismounted, and Ira Allen bowed low over the hand she gave him.

"I think the gratitude is mine," he said. "I trust the time is not far hence when I can show it.

May we not hope that the friendship, begun on this night of storm, will outlast the days of battle, and continue throughout long years of peace?"

"I am sure it will," she said with grave sweetness.

He rode away across the fields, along the path she had taken an hour before.

Hester, leading Ti, hastened toward the barn. The stimulus of excitement had passed, leaving her faint and weary. A few drops of rain fell upon her face, warning her to hasten. But as she left the barn her quick ear caught the tramp of hoofs in the field to the south. Could it be Ira Allen, returning to escape the storm? She felt sure it was not. Who, then, could it be? She stood still, trembling. It was not till the rider was very near that she saw it was Mark Ellis. He dismounted, and advanced toward her, his bridle-rein thrown over his arm. She remembered the letter she carried, and the antagonism she had always felt in his presence deepened. Some inward force opposed the fulfilment of her trust.

"Is that you, Hester?" he exclaimed in surprise. "I saw you ride up a moment since, but knew not who it was. Might I inquire what errand called you forth so late?"

The slight touch of irony seldom absent from his voice, roused her, as usual.

"A matter of importance took me to the village," she answered coldly; then as her quick eyes fell to his horse, that stood trembling and covered with foam, she exclaimed:

"Oh, how cruelly you have ridden him!"

Ellis laughed mockingly.

"I wish you'd spend half the pity on the rider you waste on the horse."

She ignored his remark.

"Captain Ellis," she said in the same tone of haughty reserve, "here is a letter for you my father left in my charge." Then, her voice changing from coldness to one of childlike earnestness. "Oh, do you know where he is gone? He rode away this morning, he would not tell us whither."

For the first time a suspicion entered her mind that this man knew the reason for her father's sudden departure. For all his accustomed coolness he found it hard to meet those pleading eyes.

"I would I might tell you," he answered, "but I know naught of the matter. I am sure there is no need for anxiety."

He took the letter, opened it, and read it through by the light of the lantern she carried. No exclamation rose to his lips; the expression of his face did not change, though the news was alarming enough to have excused either.

"Many thanks, fair Hester, for your kindness.

You have done me a greater service than you will ever know."

The words seemed earnest. Her mood softened. Perhaps she was misjudging him.

"You think that all is right?" she faltered. "I know not what it is that troubles me. But a month ago there was only sunshine. But for freedom's sake I can bear it all."

In spite of the waning light they could see each other clearly, and Ellis thrilled at the look on her face. His life was in great danger; he knew it well, though that alone had scarcely power to move him, but when to the knowledge of his peril was added a touch of sympathy in Hester's manner, the passion that lay hidden beneath his habitual carelessness leaped to the surface. He forgot that the girl before him was the one who had long defied him; the one he had sworn to conquer. The power he could not master, the admiration he could not repress, swayed him strangely. He caught her hands in his and held them fast.

"Hester," he cried, "Hester, where you are, there can be no shadows. You are above them all."

Something half-remembered flashed through Hester's mind; a gleam of recollection shone in her eyes, like one who seeks to recall a vanished dream.

"I remember"—she began, then ceased, be-

wildered. "What you said brought it back, but it is gone."

She drew away quickly, seeing for the first time that her hands lay in his.

The long-gathering storm broke with a crash of cannon above their heads. Darkness fell between them, like a suddenly fallen curtain. The wind, rain-laden, swept howling through the branches. The lightning flashed vividly like the crossing of demon-swords.

Hester, half-blinded by the rain, began to run toward the house, crying to Ellis:

"Come in till the storm is over."

"My necessity cannot wait for the storm. But I shall return, and speedily," he called back.

The next instant the door opened and Hester was caught in the clasp of her mother's arms.

CHAPTER XII

COUNCILS OF WAR

WHILE the storm thundered above the Robinson house, while Mark Ellis rode at full speed through the rain-drenched woods, Nathan Bennett sat in a log hut sixteen miles from Bennington, and tried to think of plans for escape. A Hessian stood on guard at either side of the door and the sentry was splashing through the puddles outside. The rain fell in torrents down the clay chimney, and the smouldering fire hissed and sputtered. On the opposite side of the hearth Neil Barton sat in gloomy silence. When march had been resumed that morning he and Nathan Bennett had been placed side by side, and they had been confined together in the hut when halt was made for the night. For an hour past no word had been spoken. It was not that speech was forbidden; their guards cared little whether they spoke or not. But they knew themselves to be rivals and even here each felt the other's presence unwelcome.

Nathan Bennett had found occasion earlier in

the day to offer money to his two guards with a promise of more, if they would aid him to slip unnoticed from the hut. The two had agreed to the plan, and furthermore had secured the support of the sentry. At midnight, when all was quiet, Nathan meant to attempt escape. The storm only furthered his plans. In such a rush of wind and rain no one unaccustomed to the ground could follow him far. It was now past eleven; in an hour, if all went well, he would be on the way to Stark's camp. The silent figure opposite him made a restless movement and the question which had been surging through Nathan Bennett's mind all day rose to his lips. He raised his head, looking full at his companion:

"Do you love Hester Robinson?" he demanded in a low voice.

Neil Barton stared at him, astonished.

"Well, sir, what affair is it of yours?" he cried with a sneer.

"Will you not answer my question, Lieutenant Barton?" said the other without the least sign of anger. "You can trust me not to betray your confidence. We speak here as man to man."

Neil flushed hotly. His blue eyes regarded Nathan Bennett with the utmost scorn. He could not have looked at a worm with more contempt.

"I love her and I intend to marry her," he burst out defiantly.

Nathan Bennett started slightly; his eyes returned to the smouldering fire.

"So I thought," he said calmly. "You mean she is to be your wife?"

"So I said," replied Neil haughtily.

Nathan Bennett rose to his feet and began to pace up and down the narrow hut. His face was set in lines of pain. He wrestled bitterly with his soul. Suddenly he turned and came back to the hearth.

"I, too, love her," he murmured as if to himself.

Neil laughed scornfully.

"So *you* tried to win her, did you?" he exclaimed in amusement.

The other ignored the taunt. Dropping his voice to a whisper he went on rapidly.

"Lieutenant Barton, I have bribed the guards to let me escape to-night. There is a chance for one man, but not for two. You have said that Hester Robinson was to become your wife. Very well, then I offer you the chance. You will go to General Stark and tell him what you know of the enemy's plans."

"What do *you* intend to do?" said Neil, this time without a sneer.

"Oh, I shall try my fortune later, to-morrow night, perhaps. I shall escape before the battle, at any cost."

Neil was inwardly astounded. He had not expected such a proposal from the man he had termed an upstart. He knew that to accept this noble sacrifice would be a despicable thing; but his jealousy was strong. If this man should escape he would probably go at once to Hester and win her heart with some wild tale of love. Whereas, if he, himself, casting aside the reproaches of conscience, accepted the opportunity, he would be able to secure Hester's favour before his rival made good his escape. There was no chivalry in Neil's nature. He knew he was taking a contemptible advantage, but he did not hesitate to use it for the accomplishment of his purpose.

"I accept your offer," said he, with the air of conferring a favour.

Nathan Bennett could not wholly banish the surprise from his face. Was the man as mean-souled as this? But all he said was:

"Very well, it is arranged then. But I have my uniform and you have not. When the time comes you had better wrap yourself in my cloak. You are not as tall as I, but they will not notice that; the light is so dim."

An hour later Nathan Bennett sat alone by the fading fire. His sacrifice for Hester was accomplished; Neil had escaped unpursued. But there was no peace for his tortured heart; no rest for his troubled soul. He felt as if he had flung away the

only hope that made life worth the living. That Neil should marry Hester; a man that was not worthy to touch her hand! He sprang up with clenched fingers as if to meet a foe; then shuddered as if with pain.

“Hester,” he cried, “Hester, there was a light once, but now all is darkness!”

Morning found the Robinson house in a state of unusual excitement. The inmates had been wakened at dawn by the tramp of Stark’s brigade, marching out to the relief of Gregg, and the sound had dispelled all thoughts of sleep. Isaac Clark’s horse had been found in a field near the house, and the indomitable scout had insisted upon being helped into the saddle, and allowed to ride homeward. At ten o’clock Parson Dewey rode up, with the proposal that they should return with him to the village and avail themselves of the protection of his home throughout the days of contest. Now that Ezra Robinson had gone, the lonely house in the path of the enemy was a dangerous place. Therefore they gratefully accepted his kindness.

Bennington was in an uproar that changed it almost beyond recognition. The street was thronged with refugees from the surrounding towns, and every door-yard held a restless group of people. The Catamount Tavern was like a beehive—members of the Council coming and going;

scouts departing with messages; appeals for ammunition being despatched. Yet all was done with remarkable swiftness and lack of confusion. Though excitement ran high throughout the town, it was the suppressed excitement of the Northern temperament; the calm courage born of determination.

At noon the news came that Stark had held a sharp skirmish with the enemy, then finding the place unfavourable for protracted fighting, had fallen back a mile, and was now encamped on high ground two miles northwest of the town. Baum seeing that the Americans were too strong to attack, intrenched himself on a steep hill, rising four hundred feet above the Walloomsac, and sent back for reinforcements. The hostile camps, less than two miles apart, were concealed from each other by the intervening hills.

The afternoon passed slowly by in the waiting town. Late in the day Neil rode to the Dewey house and inquired for Hester. She greeted him with her usual gentle manner, but when he tried to prolong the conversation she excused herself on the ground that she was needed in the house, and disappeared. He had gained nothing by his base acceptance of Nathan Bennett's sacrifice. Throughout the day's anxiety and toil Hester was radiant with a secret joy that seemed to lift her above all present fear. She had learned that morning from

Isaac Clark that Nathan Bennett himself was the sender of the letter that had so perplexed her. Her heart had told her truly. It was not Neil; it was Nathan Bennett who loved her, and whom she loved.

That night Stark held a council of war in his tent, and decided to attack the enemy next day. But a higher power than that of man was shaping the future. Before midnight a severe storm came up, and throughout the following day the rain fell in torrents. It was impossible for Stark to do more than skirmish. Meantime the Council were not idle. So watchful were they, so keen of wit, so dauntless, that it was indeed well said: "There was one catamount on the sign-post; there were twelve catamounts within."

What a day that was, that 15th of August, for the threatened homes of Bennington! A heavy curtain of blinding rain hung between them and the hills that held their fate. The women busied themselves in moulding bullets and preparing lint for the bandages that would so soon be needed. Now and then a horseman covered with mud galloped down the street, or a wagon loaded with powder-kegs clattered away toward the camp. Yet for all the courage that prevailed, there were aching and anxious hearts in the little town. They had seen their soldiers march out to join Stark; not a household but had given a father or a son for the cause

they loved. From a window of the old Tavern Stephen Fay saw five of his sons go forth for their country's sake; even David, not yet sixteen, had gone as a drummer boy. Oh, the proud light in the lad's eyes as he slung the heavy drum across his shoulders! Elijah Dewey of the inn by the church was captain of a company; Isaac Tichenor was commissary of the army; Ira Allen, Secretary of the Council, was a lieutenant under Warner. The town had given its all!

The day before, at Saincoick, Baum had written to Burgoyne on the head of a barrel found in a mill: "From prisoners here they agree that from fifteen to eighteen hundred men are at Bennington, but are supposed to leave on our approach."

His prophecy in the main was true; they did leave, but not in the direction he had expected.

Night came down upon Bennington; a night desolate with utter darkness and the fall of rain. The townspeople, gathered round their hearthstones, listened intently, straining their ears for the slightest sound. During the day they had heard the musket-shots of the skirmishers, but to-night all was still.

In the Council-room of the Catamount Tavern the light shone over a group of men who would have been equally distinguished in any time and company. A large table covered with maps and papers occupied the centre of the room; around it

were gathered the members of the Council; Stark, Warner, and their officers.

How many other famous meetings had been held here, from the time when Ethan Allen dispensed justice and the "Beech-Seal" to the obtrusive Yorkers to that spring day in '75 when in this same chamber he and his Green Mountain Boys plotted the capture of Ticonderoga!

Stark, in his blue uniform, sat at one end of the long table. He held in his hand a map of Bennington and its vicinity. Presently he took a pen from the table and drew lines representing the position of his forces.

"Now, gentlemen," he was saying, handing the map to Thomas Chittenden, "will you examine the drawing and give me your judgment on the matter?"

In a deep silence the map was passed from one to the other. So still it was that the moan of the wind in the eaves and the beat of rain-drops on the roof were startlingly loud.

At length Thomas Chittenden rose,

"General Stark," he said solemnly, "we are all one in agreeing that your plan seems to us the best that can possibly be adopted. If that fail then surely the devices of man are in vain. But it will not fail! God Himself nerves the arm of the righteous."

So the hours passed by in minute discussion of

the methods to be employed in the accomplishment of their project. At last Stark and Warner rose, and bidding a grave good-night to the Council, rode through the stormy darkness to the camp. It was long past midnight and they were tired, but not disheartened. The sentry at the store-houses challenged them and they gave for countersign the name of Ethan Allen. They rode on, high-hearted to meet the foe. The dusky land before them might have been deserted. No sign was there to show that among those distant hills the patriot army lay hidden. No sound came from those shadowy heights; they lay locked in absolute quiet. But it was not the quiet of inaction or despair.

CHAPTER XIII

BENNINGTON BATTLE

IN front of Stark's tent, where a couple of flaring torches threw an unsteady light, officers of regiments were gathered in the early hours of the morning. Among them was the general himself, alert and active, without an indication of his all-night's vigil.

The Berkshire militia, commanded by Colonel Simonds, had reached their camp late in the evening. In their midst, enthroned in his one-horse chaise, rode Parson Allen of Pittsfield. In those days he was a young man in his early thirties, ceaselessly fervid in the cause of liberty. He had plotted the fall of Ticonderoga with his cousin, Ethan Allen; he had been present two years later at the surrender of the fortress, and relentlessly opposed St. Clair's disastrous retreat, and upon the news of Burgoyne's approach he had collected his followers and marched to Stark's assistance. The Berkshire men were drawn up near by, ready armed and eager to fling themselves upon the foe. Parson Allen, his tall figure held erect, his determined face

alive with fighting ardour, stood listening impatiently to the conference near the tent. When it was finished he drew near to Stark, exclaiming:

“We, the people of Berkshire, have frequently been called upon to fight, but have never been led against the enemy. We have now resolved, if you will not let us fight, never to turn out again.”

A smile crossed the general’s face.

“Well, Parson, would you have us fall to now, when it’s dark as pitch and raining buckets?” he inquired gravely.

“Not just at this moment, perhaps,” conceded the parson reluctantly.

“Very well, then,” returned the dauntless Stark. “As soon as the Lord sends us sunshine, if I do not give you fighting enough, I’ll never ask you to come out again.”

As Stark turned to re-enter his tent a horseman emerged suddenly from the darkness into the glow of the torches, and the rider sprang to the ground at the commander’s side. It was Nathan Bennett. A wave of surprise ran through the group of officers. Most of them had not expected his return. Indeed, upon his sudden disappearance three days before it had been whispered about the camp that Nathan Bennett had deserted to the enemy. Certain of the young soldier’s traducers went so far as to say that he was one of Burgoyne’s spies. Colonel Herrick, a man high-

minded and just, heard it with indignation. Turning to his fellow-officers he had said:

“ Gentlemen, I will not hear Captain Bennett thus maligned. If you have any proof of his guilt, I will listen to it, but I will not hearken to unfounded slander.”

This had ended outspoken discussion of the subject, but in secret men still affirmed that Nathan Bennett was a spy, or something worse. Neil Barton, for reasons of his own, had not mentioned his generous foe. In the Grants people knew all about their neighbors, and perhaps it was not surprising that the open-hearted Green Mountain Boys viewed with suspicion a man who, during two months' sojourn among them, had never mentioned a single incident of his past life.

But now that Nathan Bennett stood before them,—without hat or coat, wet from a plunge in the river, covered with mud from his ride,—his bearing was so noble that shame sprang up in many a heart.

“ General Stark, may I ask an interview with you alone? ”

Stark bowed compliance and raised the tent curtain. The two disappeared within.

Of that conversation none knew till long afterward. Nathan Bennett told first of his escape from the Hessian guards, his swimming the river, his lucky finding of a riderless horse that knew the

way in that dark night better than he did himself. Then he spoke sadly and reluctantly of his plan to defeat the traitor and the accident which had caused its overthrow. Better proof could hardly have been had of Ezra Robinson's journey to the enemy's camp than the fact that it was his brown mare Nathan had found in the field near the Tory breastwork, and ridden to Stark's headquarters.

When the two emerged from the tent the rain had ceased. Light was breaking along the eastern hills; and above them the clouds hung shattered.

"God is granting our prayer," said Stark, "the sun will shine to-day."

A fairer morning never dawned upon the lovely valley. Not a thread of mist trailed upon the hills. When all was ready for the fulfilment of Stark's plan, and the regiments drawn up in line of battle were awaiting the last order of the commander-in-chief, the Berkshire militia drew aside and knelt in prayer, while Parson Allen, his fervent voice echoing far over the assembled ranks, besought the God of Battles in whose might they trusted to grant victory to a righteous cause and annihilation to those who would trample upon liberty. When the prayer was finished, lofty purpose and unfaltering courage shone upon every face. Stark now rode out in front of the waiting lines:

"Men of New England," he cried, "the moment for action has come; your positions have been assigned; each man knows what duty is required of him. You must this day drive back the foe who has pierced to your very thresholds, or own yourselves defeated by British hirelings. May the God of Hosts fight with us as He fought with the Israel of old and deliver the enemy into our hands!"

A mighty shout burst from the surging ranks, and every man swung his hat and cheered for Stark.

These were the men to whom New England looked for deliverance. If they failed, their homes, their wives, and their children would be prey to the invader. If they won, their names would be breathed in honour by unborn generations. Strong of heart as of body, firm of faith as of hand, they went forth unfearing in the name of God and the right.

Men in homespun, in deerskin, in forest green, with bullet-pouch, powder-horn, and long-barrelled musket swung in steady lines along the Cambridge road. Every New Hampshire man wore a corn-husk in his three-cornered hat, every Vermonter the evergreen sprig of Ethan Allen.

While they were yet hidden from the enemy, Nichols and his detachment left the road, and turning to the right, disappeared into the woods

which swept away to the northward in unbroken miles. Herrick's Rangers, wheeling southward, descended a hill to the left of Stark's encampment and plunged into the forest at its base. Here there was no road, scarcely a bridle-path, winding beneath interlocking boughs. They marched in single file with the light swift step of men to whom the woods were familiar. With figures upright as the unbending oaks beside them, muskets held low, and eyes ceaselessly watchful, they trod the forest pathway as silently as Indians. The sun mounted higher, the heat of the day grew intense in the open, but under the shade of the beeches it was dark and cool. Nathan Bennett, marching near the head of the line, found it impossible to realise that there could be foes in this forest solitude. So still it was that the light rustle of leaves seemed low whispering. Now and then a bird fluttered above their heads, or a loosened acorn fell with a soft thud. Once they paused by a mossy rock and drank from the clear water flowing over it.

Hour after hour they pressed on, curving westward in a wide semicircle. It was long past noon and they went swiftly but with redoubled caution. The woods began to thin a little and the ground to rise. At short intervals they halted, and the scouts, kneeling, put their ears to the ground. Within an hour they had heard the sound of cannonading, but now the quiet was undisturbed.

They knew themselves to be very close to the rear of Baum's intrenchments.

It was nearly three o'clock by the sun when two of the scouts who had gone forward to reconnoitre returned with the information that the enemy's rear guard was but a few rods distant. Tense excitement ran through the ranks. Each man looked to his musket and set his lips in determination. Noiselessly they stole forward to where a blue glimmer of sky showed through the arching oaks. A moment more and they were on the edge of the woods. Before them lay a steep green slope crested by earthworks, whence the hot afternoon sun drew a glint of scarlet from the figures within them. Herrick's men longed to rush upward and leap upon those breastworks, but they must await the signal. Where was Nichols? Had he yet reached his appointed place?

Suddenly the heavy crash of muskets fired close at hand rent the dreamy stillness of the hot air. The New Hampshire Boys broke from the woods to the left and charged up the slope, pouring a line of fire into the enemies' works.

On a hill to the right of the Hessian intrenchments were defences manned by Tories. Nathan Bennett and others of Herrick's Rangers with Captain Robinson's company rushed to attack them. Samuel Safford, aged sixteen, with a boy's fleetness, outstripped the rest, clambered over the

logs and slippery earth, and was the first to scale the breastworks. But the rest were close behind, ready to wreak vengeance upon the hated loyalists. After a volley or two the Tories, panic-stricken, retreated wildly down the hill to the southwest, only to be seized as prisoners before they could reach the woods. The Indians also, who had been left to guard the rear, fled in confusion. Now for the Hessian works! Up the steep slope, firing from behind logs and trees, now advancing a space, now falling back, but steadily pressing onward toward those stern ramparts, whence musketry and cannon poured incessant fire, Nichols and Herrick, New Hampshire and Green Mountain boys, surged in mad affray. Now and again a comrade fell; here and there the warm grass showed a tinge of scarlet. Fight on, men of New England, fight on in the name of that God ye worship! Ram home the bullet, more swiftly pour the powder, pray for unerring aim! If ye buy your freedom, ye must buy it with the lives that ye hold dear!

Meanwhile Stark's brigade were marching and countermarching over the cleared land in the enemy's front, their purpose being to deceive Baum, and withdraw his attention from his sides and rear. When the troops came within range the cannon on the hill were trained upon them, but the shots were scattering and did little harm. Leaving

the brigade drawn up in line of battle, Stark and Warner rode ahead to examine the ground. A cannon-shot struck near the General's horse, making it plunge and rear. As they galloped back, Stark called out:

“Those rascals know I am an officer. Don't you see they honour me with a big gun as a salute?” Notwithstanding the anxiety of the moment, a laugh ran through the ranks at this dry humour.

The sun reached the zenith and began to decline toward the west. The men, weary of marching through the heat, came to a halt in a grove of pines by the river. Stark, still in the saddle, drew Warner aside and spoke to him in an anxious whisper.

“It is full time they reached——” he began.

The words were interrupted by the sharp quick cracking of musket-shots distinctly heard above the report of the cannon. It was firing in the rear, the agreed signal for attack! Stark raised his arm, and pointed across the river to where, above the dark crown of woods, above the brown earth-walls and the red-and-green of the Hessian uniforms, the flag of England streamed out in scarlet against the hot blue.

“Men,” he cried, and his voice, clear, high, and steady, rose above din of cannon and patter of musketry, “*there are the red-coats, and they are ours, or this night Molly Stark sleeps a widow!*”

The appeal was irresistible. With a mighty cheer they followed. He struck the spurs to his horse and dashed full gallop for the Tory breast-work by the river. They pressed forward; the Berkshire men well in the lead, the pine-tree flag of the Old Bay State carried high. Bullets began to fly from the breasts-work and were answered by bullets from every tree and rock. Parson Allen, mounting upon a stump, commanded the Tories to lay down their arms.

“ Surrender, ye infidels to your country’s cause. Surrender, lest ye be smitten with a curse! ”

The only answer to this exhortation was a shower of bullets from the breastwork. The parson, seeing his advice to be unavailing, caught up a musket, withdrew to the shelter of a friendly tree, and proved that his aim might even excel his preaching.

In five minutes the works were forced, and the Tories and Canadians falling back toward the river, Stark and his brigade plunged into the foaming mountain current in pursuit, and driving back the grenadiers at the Cambridge road, rushed up the ravine west of the great hill. Up, up, they climbed to the aid of their comrades. Bullet and cannon shot fell round them, tearing the earth. Steeper and steeper grew the slope, more and more difficult the ascent; Stark and Warner abandoned their horses, and proceeded on foot at the head of

the column. Stickney and Hobart, Nichols and Herrick, Warner and Stark, and their "resolute men" drew their lines nearer and nearer round the doomed breastwork.

But if Tories and Indians were an easy prey, the Hessians were far otherwise. Hirelings though they were, they fought with unflinching valour, yet the mad onset of the New Englanders nothing could withstand. Undisciplined, for the most part un-uniformed, bareheaded and in their shirt-sleeves, with hands and faces blackened with powder, they hurled themselves upon the intrenched Brunswickers as a great wave hurls itself upon a storm-tossed ship.

West of the rampart and very near it grew a few scattered trees. Behind these a number of Yankee marksmen had taken position, pouring a steady rain of shot at the redoubt. Nathan Bennett, in the shelter of a white oak, paused to let his musket cool, and glanced at a neighbouring pine, where stood John Fay, calm and determined, loading and firing with skilled rapidity. As Nathan Bennett looked at him, John Fay raised his musket to take aim, saying in a clear voice:

"I feel that I am fighting in a good cause."

Even as he spoke, he leaned a little to one side of the protecting trunk, and his fingers tightened upon the trigger, a shot sped from the rampart. With his gun unfired, John Fay fell forward, dead.

The sword which had pierced so many hearts would pierce the heart of Stephen Fay.

Nathan Bennett ran forward and knelt beside the prostrate figure. The face wore a resolute smile, the hand still pressed the trigger. For him the fight had ended; he had died as dies a patriot. Fire does not seize more quickly upon seasoned wood than the words passed from lip to lip among his townsmen: "John Fay is shot!" As a smouldering spark leaps into lurid flame, the Bennington men sprang from the shelter of the trees and rushed with resistless force up the slope to the parapet. From all sides the men surged on; the movement was simultaneous. Suddenly the air was shaken by a heavy concussion; the ground trembled and rocked. The ammunition cart had exploded within the works. But only for a moment was the rush of the besiegers checked. Surmising what had happened, the New Englanders plunged forward, a tide that none could stem, and broke above the breastworks. No time or space to load or aim. Bayonet and butt of musket were the weapons of the moment. Hand to hand they fought, Yankee and Brunswicker, stalwart farmer and Hessian cannonier. Well indeed might Stark say of that desperate struggle, "the hottest I ever saw in my life. . . . one continual clap of thunder." He had seen Abercrombie's troops go down before Montcalm at Ticonderoga, he had seen the

pitiless aim that mowed the British at Bunker Hill, but he must wait for Bennington to see the terrible power of the Anglo-Saxon blood fired to white-heat!

Nathan Bennett and his comrades closed in upon a group of Hessians in the southwest corner of the redoubt, who, though surrounded, still fought desperately. Though their powder had given out, they charged the Americans again and again with bayonets. At the head of this forlorn hope was Baum. He was wounded, but he would not yield. Nathan Bennett felt a sense of admiration at his dauntless but unavailing courage. At that moment a ball struck Baum in the side, and he swayed and fell to the ground. But even then he raised himself on one elbow and tried in vain to rise. A lad of twenty, who had seen John Fay's death, caught a sword from a fallen Hessian and sprang furiously at the wounded officer. Before he could strike, Nathan Bennett rushed between him and his victim, wrenching the sword from his hands.

"Coward!" cried he; "would you strike a wounded prisoner?" The youth fell back, ashamed; Nathan Bennett, kneeling down, tore some cloth from his sleeve, and supporting Baum, began to bind up his wound. The British officer, half-fainting, opened his eyes. The face that bent above him, though black with dust and powder, was gentle as a woman's; the hands that fastened

the bandage were light as they were skilful. Recognition shone in Baum's eyes.

"Captain Bennett," he murmured faintly, and would have spoken further, but his strength failed him, and he sank back unconscious.

The remaining Hessians, seeing their leader fallen, quickly surrendered to their intrepid foes. The fight so stormily waged, so bravely fought by victor and by vanquished, was over. Cannon and musket alike were dumb. Above the breastworks, heaped with Hessian dead, above the torn flag, lowered in defeat, above the trodden slopes where lay the patriot slain, hung lifting smoke-clouds, dimming the brilliant sunlight.

The patriots were scattered far and wide over the hill-top, securing the prisoners, caring for the wounded, stooping in sad reverence above the dead. But before the excitement had time to cool, before the first elation of triumph could subside, word came that Breyman, dispatched with seven hundred men to reinforce Baum, was less than two miles distant. The news was indeed alarming, for so great was the confusion that it would seem impossible to rally the scattered forces and meet this new foe. Stark's first intention was to command a retreat in order to draw up his troops in line of battle; but Warner eagerly proposed that they should attack at once, and his counsel was speedily followed. The New Englanders, weary

of body, but dauntless of spirit, marched resolutely down the road to Sancoick. They could hear the heavy roll of drums, and the shrill clamour of fifes from the woods ahead, as they went.

Breyman and his German grenadiers advanced steadily, raining grape-shot from the cannon into the wavering and worn-out ranks of the opposers. The patriots gave answering fire from Baum's captured field-pieces and their own faithful muskets. Parson Allen charged his smoking gun with unflinching zeal. As a clergyman, his principles opposed the taking of human life, but it may here be said that, as a soldier of liberty, he did not hesitate when he "saw a flash in a bush near by" to "fire that way and put it out."

The Yankee skirmishers sent telling shots into the Hessian lines. Leonard Robinson, who was a deadly marksman, never fired without bringing a man to the ground. As he said long afterward:

"I prayed the Lord to have mercy on his soul; and then I took care of his body."

But in vain did Stark's men seek to hold their ground. Hungry, exhausted, confronted by this strong, fresh force, they began to fall back, though slowly and without confusion, fighting steadily step by step. Stark himself, perceiving an advance to be impossible, was about to order a retreat, when Warner, spurring forward, cried out:

“Stand to it, my lads; you shall have help immediately.”

In a moment the hurried tramp of feet could be heard above the uproar, and down the road from Bennington, came at a swift run, Warner’s regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel Safford. They had marched from Manchester through the storm of the preceding day, reached Bennington before noon, and waiting only long enough to dry their muskets and be supplied with food by the patriotic women, had hastened to the battle-ground. Timely indeed was their coming, for Stark’s brigade was hard pressed and well-nigh surrounded. Warner’s regiment, rushing in front of their tired comrades, rallied the broken lines and made a bold and effectual stand. Hope revived at the strength of this new ally, and the spent forces once more advanced. The fight waged hotly, and again, as on the breastworks, men fought hand to hand. Breyman’s cannon were captured, relinquished and retaken by the brave New Englanders, each of whom, according to Stark, could not have “behaved more gallantly had he been an Alexander or a Charles of Sweden.”

The sun crept lower and lower, and with it sank the strength of the British force. “Our martial courage proved too hard for them.” Breyman’s troops were “compelled to retire”; indeed, twilight found them retiring “very hastily.” The

Americans pursued them through the increasing darkness, till scarlet uniform and grey homespun were indistinguishable in the dusk.

Wearily but gladly, with aching limbs, but hearts victorious, the patriot army retraced the miles of that day's journey. Triumphant as they were, they did not realise the far-reaching greatness of their achievement. They, the untrained Yankee farmers, had conquered troops "environed by breastworks,"—had rescued their homes and dear ones,—but they had done far more; they had saved New England from destruction; they had struck the first blow in Burgoyne's downfall; they had once more proved to the King that America was capable of resistance. Two hundred men had died that day beneath the deadly fire of those who fought their bravest because their all was at stake; more than six hundred prisoners were on their way to the little village, now forever famous.

As they passed the battle hill Nathan Bennett, riding the re-captured "Catamount," spurred to Stark's side, and saluting, whispered a few words. The general, listening gravely, bowed assent.

"That is right, Captain Bennett. I admire your gratitude. You will report to Captain Robinson for duty."

As he rode upon his errand Nathan Bennett looked up sadly at the dark hill, looming above his head. He remembered how he had gazed at

it on that night but four days past, and how much fate had wrought in that brief time. He thought of the dead who slept beneath the shadows; friend and foe laid side by side on the hill-top. The ghosts of the slain would tread those slopes to-night. He repressed the fancy.

“They will not return,” he thought; “theirs is a deeper and more lasting peace.”

CHAPTER XIV

DEEPENING SHADOWS

WHILE men fought on the heights of the swift Walloomsac, while musket and cannon shook the valley, Bennington prayed and listened. Few were left in the little town save women and children and men too old to bear a musket. When, late in the morning, the first dull echoes of the cannonading reached their ears, the children spoke in whispers as if the foe were at their very doors, and the women went about their work with faces white and set.

There was no sobbing or wailing or wringing of hands; but the fear was none the less deep for that. By three o'clock the heavy pealing of the cannon was accompanied by sharp volleys of musketry, making known to the anxious watchers that the fight had begun in earnest. It was then that Parson Dewey gathered a little group together in the meeting-house, and with passionate supplication, prayed for deliverance. Polly and Hester, kneeling side by side in the great square pew, heard the voice of the old preacher but dimly be-

cause of the jarring thunder of that storm six miles away. At times the building rocked, the floor trembled, and the sound, caught up by the hills, was repeated in myriad echoes. Outside, the August sun was hot upon the grass, and the leaf-shadows danced on the grey head-stones and lay in elfin traceries upon the winding path. All the warm sweet earth was at peace; man alone was at war.

Who could measure the length of that afternoon, the hours of that golden summer day? At five o'clock the sound of firing ceased, and it grew very quiet. From the hill where stood the store-houses heavy smoke-clouds could be seen far to the northwestward. Was Stark triumphant upon that distant field, or did that veiling smoke hide his shattered and defeated columns? Suspense pressed closer. A little before six a messenger, arriving post-haste from the battle-field, informed the Council that Stark had won in the first fight. Swift joy filled every heart. This coming of hope on the very steps of despair made them forgetful of the sorrows that must also come with victory.

The summer dusk was falling when the prisoners, marching two by two under a strong guard, came into town, advancing in weary procession down the long street. It was not thus that they had expected to enter Bennington. They halted in front of the Catamount Tavern, and Stephen

Fay, standing beneath the sign-post, bowed low, and said gravely:

“ Gentlemen, the dinner you ordered prepared is now ready.”

Loud laughter from Stark’s men and the members of the Council greeted this sarcasm, which, however, failed to awaken mirth in the breasts of the prisoners. The joke was entirely at their expense, for upon Friday Baum and his officers, confident of victory, had sent a haughty message to Captain Fay, ordering dinner for the next day at the Catamount Tavern. Tory and Hessian, crest-fallen and forlorn, were hurried on to the meeting-house, where Stark and the Council of Safety had worshipped but a week before. The good women of Bennington had been forced to take down their bedsteads in order to secure rope enough to tie the captives.

By dark arrived the tidings that Breyman was in full flight and Stark’s victory complete. The triumphant town, long in suspense, went wild with rejoicing; yet the joy became soon tempered with sadness. Into four homes of the brave little village had the arrow pierced; John Fay and Henry Walbridge, Daniel Warner, the Colonel’s cousin, and Nathan Clark, brother of the brave scout, had fallen upon that distant hillside.

In a room of the Catamount Tavern was enacted a scene pitifully sad. Ira Allen had been

chosen to bear to Stephen Fay the news of his son's death. When the two were alone, the young man with bowed head and faltering voice said slowly:

"Captain Fay, to me falls the sad task of telling you that a great misfortune has befallen you, concerning one of your sons."

Stephen Fay sprang up.

"What mean you? Has he misbehaved? Did he desert his post, or run from the charge?"

"No, Captain," said Ira Allen, in a low tone. "John Fay is among the slain; he fell contending mightily in the cause."

Stephen Fay sank into a chair. A quiver passed over his face, and vanished, leaving it full of a strange peace. When he spoke, his voice was the voice of a man in a dream.

"*Then I am satisfied.* I thank God I had a son who was willing to give his life for his country."

It was Ira Allen himself who brought the sad tidings to the Dewey household. With a heavy heart he lifted the brass knocker of the white house by the church, and when Hester opened the door he found it doubly hard to meet her happy eyes.

Mrs. Robinson and the good minister set out straightway for the home of John Fay, now desolate indeed, while Hester and Polly accompanied by Ira Allen went slowly and sadly up the street toward the Catamount Tavern. The door-

yard of the inn was filled with friends and neighbours, eager to offer sympathy and aid. So deep was the sorrow that it would have been hard to imagine a great victory had been won that day, for every face was grave and each man spoke, not of triumph, but of him they mourned.

Hester stole softly into the room where Stephen Fay sat alone. A candle burned low on the table beside him. The silent figure upon the bed was not more still than he. Dr. Jonas Fay and David had just gone out, but he had not noticed their absence. He did not hear the soft foot-fall and the opening door as Hester entered; and when she was at his side, he did not move or speak. A wave of pity swept over her. She thought how kind he was, how loving, and her young heart ached for him in his great sorrow.

“Dear Uncle Stephen!” she cried, and kneeling, flung her arms about his neck.

Something in her voice and presence loosed the power that bound him.

“Hester, dear little Hester,” he said brokenly, “God must have sent you to comfort me.”

His head fell forward on his folded arms, and he wept.

That night was long a vivid memory to both the girls. David Robinson’s house, whither they went, was filled with the wounded, laid upon mattresses on the floor, while the few doctors which the town

could boast did their best to relieve the suffering. Not only were there Stark's brave men to be cared for, but Tories and Hessians, torn and bleeding from the shots of the dauntless marksmen. It was a terrible scene to Hester and Polly, unaccustomed as they were to such a sight.

On their way home an hour after midnight, in the cool darkness outside, Hester gave a heavy sigh of utter exhaustion, while Polly, able to control herself no longer, burst into tired sobbing. At the gate they met Isaac Tichenor, carrying a lantern, and the three went down the street together. It was very cool and still and the air was full of the delicate fragrance of flowers. The waning moon was just rising behind the trees, but as yet what light there was came from the stars. So sweet and peaceful was the night that it seemed sheer folly to think that there was suffering beneath those quiet skies.

Stark and his victorious army slept on that night of the battle upon the hills where they had fought, with the long grass for a coverlet, and corn-husks for pillows. But by noon of Sunday they came marching into Bennington, to their old camping-place west of the town. Their progress down the village street was triumphal. The air was filled with the shouts of those who thronged the roadside, hailing Stark as the victor of Bennington, and the deliverer of the Grants. Never had such cheer-

ing been heard in the town since the days when the Green Mountain Boys had taken Ticonderoga.

Throughout the passing of the "little army," Hester, on the porch of the Dewey house, had searched the ranks in vain for Nathan Bennett. He was caring for the wounded British colonel in a house five miles away.

What were the thoughts of the young soldier as he sat beside the dying officer; bathing his forehead, pouring brandy between his lips, doing whatever he could to ease the pain? He thought of the battle; the charge up the hill, the mounting of the breastworks, the final victory; but through it all, of Hester. The letter written the day after his capture; had it ever reached her? And if it had, what then? If she was to wed Neil Barton, then he had written in vain. But he did not easily despair, and since his escape hope concerning Hester had revived. The instant duty allowed, he would go to her; tell her of his love, and learn for once and all how matters stood between her and Neil. So long as there was the slightest ground for hope, he vowed he would yield to no man the woman he loved.

But duty was not done with him yet. His confidences to General Stark had won the General's confidence in him in return, and laid a new errand in his path. Late that evening, in Stark's tent, Nathan listened gravely to the general's outline of

an important mission, that was to keep him, had he known it, from any sight of Hester for many a weary day.

"It is necessary, Captain Bennett, that a trusty messenger be dispatched to the Massachusetts Council of Safety, with the news of this battle. You have been chosen for this errand. The report is finished, and should be sent immediately. How soon can you start?"

"At once, General, if need be."

"Very well, sir," said Stark. "As to the subject of our discussion, I have respected your wishes. None know of my orders save the scouts who received them. If the traitor be within twenty miles of Bennington, he will not long remain hidden."

"I thank you, General Stark, for the kindness you have shown me. May I ask one more request? Would it be possible to conceal this news till my return?"

Stark looked up quickly, meeting the young man's troubled gaze.

"Why, yes, it might be possible if aught were to be gained by it."

"Others must bear the burden of his misdeed," said Nathan. "His family are already bowed with one grief; they would be wholly unprepared for this new affliction. Will you not, in mercy, grant them this short respite?"

General Stark paced the tent, then pausing said:

"I shall not soon forget Miss Robinson's bravery in carrying me the news of Baum's advance; I cannot think of her as the daughter of a traitor. I will yield to your request. Provided the traitor is not taken, the matter shall be kept silent till you return."

At midnight Nathan Bennett, galloping down the village street, cast a longing glance at the silent Dewey house; then touching "Catamount" with the spur, set out more swiftly upon his errand.

Next day, in the warm hush of the summer afternoon, Bennington laid her dead to rest. Yet not alone *her* dead—those who had died for her freedom—in the little churchyard, beneath the whispering elms, English soldier and Hessian grenadier must sleep side by side with the patriot slain. Churchyard and green were thronged with sorrowing townsmen, and an army in the first flush of triumph stood in silence beside those new-made graves. The old minister's voice, raised in prayer, shook with emotion, and tears filled many eyes at the sight of Stephen Fay's white head. Those who gave their lives that others might live in freedom would rest quietly in this peaceful place where the hills kept eternal vigil. Near the old gate, where the grass was cool, they laid beneath the earth the first-born son of Stephen Fay. The old father raised his eyes from the mound at his feet

to the blue of the cloudless sky. Upon his torn heart fell a peace that was not of earth, the peace of those who hold not back from sacrifice their dearest and their best. His son had died for his country; what fate more blessed?

After a hundred and twenty-five years the worn stone still bears record:

In memory of John Fay who fell fighting for the freedom of his country in battle fought between General Stark and Colonel Baum, called Bennington Battle, on the 16th of August, 1777. In the 43rd year of his age.

“The sweet remembrance of the Just,
Shall flourish while they sleep in dust.”

The news of Stark's victory was received with great joy by the Continental Congress and he was promoted to the rank of brigadier-general. Only six months before the same assembly which now hastened to honour him had by their injustice compelled him to retire from public life. But Stark victorious was not to be ignored. It was good proof of the man's magnanimity that in the hour of his country's need he flung all personal wrongs to the winds and led his men to the victory that saved New England and fired the north with new courage.

Bennington gradually settled again into its old ways after the first excitement of the battle had subsided; the refugees, no longer fearing invasion, returned to their abandoned homes. Stark

and his men marched away to join Gates on the Hudson; and the only outward signs of the recent struggle were the prisoners in the meeting-house and the new-made graves in the churchyard. By the end of the week Mrs. Robinson and the girls bade farewell to their kind friends in the village and returned to their home, thankful indeed, to find it safe. They grew often lonely there, as the days went by, with no word from Ezra Robinson, and they felt their helplessness.

One hot afternoon toward the end of August Mrs. Robinson had gone to the village and Polly was busy in the attic, when Hester, spinning rather languidly in a corner of the cool parlour, raised her eyes to the window just in time to see Cochise riding up at a gallop. With her heart leaping at a fear lest he brought bad news from her father, she hastened to the door just as the young Indian dismounted. His face showed a fierceness so different from its usual calm that Hester regarded him in surprise.

“Mam’selle Hestér,” he said in a whisper, throwing a keen glance over field and garden, “is it that I may borrow some powder? Need there may be of it soon.” As he spoke he held up his empty powder-horn.

“You are welcome to it, Cochise. Give me the powder-horn; I will fill it. But will you not come in out of the heat and rest?”

Halfway across the kitchen she turned. The young half-breed, watching her with eyes full of wild sadness, had drawn her gaze. She did not understand the look, but the pity she always felt for him moved her now.

"Cochise," she said, in a voice low and earnest, "I have not half thanked you for what you did that night. You have proved yourself a brave and faithful friend."

With the words, she drew nearer to him, and held out her hand. "We are friends, are we not?" she said gently.

For an instant Cochise stood motionless. Then slowly and hesitatingly he took her hand in his.

As he had touched the blue-bells she had worn upon her gown, so he touched the soft fingers lying in his rough palm; lightly, reverently, as if what he held was sacred, and his touch might harm them. He did not lift his eyes or raise his bowed head.

"Mam'selle Hestér," he answered, "that you should be my friend, I, that am half-Indian, while you,—mam'selle——"

He looked up; in his eyes adoration and infinite pathos.

Her gaze, sweet and pitying, was upon him.

Some moments they stood thus, with clasped hands, when the silence was rudely broken by a

knock that echoed loudly through the room. Hester started forward, but as she did so the latch was lifted, the outer door swung open, and upon the threshold stood Mark Ellis. A slightly startled look crossed his face as he beheld the Indian, but it vanished quickly. Advancing into the room, he bowed low to Hester.

“Forgive my intrusion,” said he, “I have ridden for miles in the heat, and the thought of this room was the temptation that caused me to enter unbidden.”

With his usual bearing of proud carelessness, he flung his hat on the table, and, still looking at Hester, drew forward the rocking-chair.

“Will you not sit here, sweet Hester? Surely the heat is too exhausting for work. Let us talk together, you and I, and dream the dreams of summer.”

He spoke to her as if they two were alone. Cochise he ignored. A terrible change had come over the young Indian; his eyes were fierce and his white teeth showed; his whole form was tense like that of a roused animal. Hester, already ill at ease under Ellis’s bold and admiring glance, forgot the unfilled powder-horn and everything else, save a desire to retreat.

“You are very kind, Captan Ellis,” she faltered forth, “but I may not remain; I have work unfinished.”

And without waiting longer, she disappeared into the hall.

Ellis shrugged his shoulders, folded his arms, and going to a window, stared idly at the landscape, humming the refrain of a song. Cochise still remained motionless; but his hand had closed upon the knife at his belt, and his glance stole toward the half-open hall-door and then toward the figure by the window. A moment went by in breathless silence. Then Cochise, stealing noiselessly to the hall-door, shut and locked it, and was halfway across the room again when Ellis turned and faced him. The young Indian, extending his arm, pointed full at the man before him, saying, as if others could hear:

“Le capitaine is a spy! Le capitaine knows it!”

Utter hatred and scorn were the only response on Ellis’s face. That this Indian should dare confront him! He lost control of himself.

“Better to be a spy under King George,” cried he, between locked teeth, “than to be king in this cursed haunt of rebels!”

A panther does not spring more swiftly upon his victim than Cochise sprang upon his foe. Ellis, for all his boldness, was taken by surprise. The Indian held him in a relentless grasp; Ellis, agile as he was, was no match for his nimble adversary. Had swords been the weapons, the balance would

have been turned, for Ellis was one of the most skilful swordsmen in the colonies, but it being a question of sheer force, the white man was at the Indian's mercy. Grappling each other, they reeled about the room, overturning chairs in their desperate struggle, sending the pewter dishes on the table crashing to the floor. At first Ellis tried to wrench the knife from the Indian's belt, but soon abandoned the attempt, and strove only to keep the other's fingers from closing about his throat. He had a pistol, but so sudden had been the attack that he was powerless to draw it. Cochise was possessed by pitiless rage; his grasp tightened upon his enemy's neck; in vain did Ellis seek to free himself. The end of the struggle was very near. At that moment a figure sprang lightly through the low southern window and a girl's voice rang out clear and imperative.

“Stop, this instant! I command you!”

Cochise at once released his foe. Ellis shook himself, drew a long breath, and smoothed the ruffles at his wrists.

“Cochise, what mean you?” cried Hester. “And Captain Ellis, is it conduct befitting a gentleman to turn this house into a tavern bar-room?”

She spoke with quiet dignity, but not without an undertone of scorn.

Ellis smiled, exclaiming:

" You are welcome, sweet angel of peace; we were only settling our differences."

Cochise turned to Hester:

" Mam'selle, you will forgive when you know all." He raised his musket, saying: " The powder I need not now, mam'selle. There is a charge left." He bowed to her, exchanged a look of hatred with his foe, and took his leave.

When he had gone Ellis approached Hester. She was standing by the table, her sweet face proud and angry.

" Hester," he said, " I ask your pardon. That fellow sprang at me like a catamount and I did but defend myself."

" I accept your apology," she answered coldly. " If it is Polly that you seek, I will go and call her."

Had she looked at him, she would have had warning of what was to happen, for the gaze he turned upon her was full of ardent passion.

" It is not Polly I want," he cried, " it is you, and you alone."

He sprang forward and caught her in his arms.

" Hester," he cried, " Hester, I love you, I love you!"

She pulled herself out of his grasp; looking at him with wide and startled eyes, the eyes of a child that has been struck or hurt. But surprise passed quickly, giving way to anger. The hot colour

flooded cheek and brow; she stamped her foot on the wooden floor.

“How dare you!” she cried. “What do you mean, sir, by such behaviour?”

He seized her hands.

“Listen to me, fair Hester, and be not angry without cause. I have told the truth. You alone, I love. I have seen many beautiful women, but none so fair as you, and none with your courage and understanding. Why will you not believe me, Hester?”

Her anger had changed to perplexity.

“How can I believe you?” she answered simply; “you know that you love Polly. You cannot mean what you say.”

“Nay, sweet Hester, I love not Polly.”

“Do not love Polly?” echoed she, with blazing eyes. “But you told her so, and she believes you, and now you pretend to love me! Oh, you are cruel, cruel!”

“Why cruel, pretty one? Every maid likes harmless flattery and sweet words. Do you think Polly ever took a mere amusement for reality? With you, sweet Puritan, it is different. You use no idle coquetry. You claim love itself, not its shadow.”

Her troubled eyes still tried to read his face.

“And you expect me to believe this?” she cried. “Polly thought you in earnest and you

let her think so! I have lived all my life in the wilderness; I know naught of city ways, but *I can tell true love from that which is false!* You deceived Polly, you tried to deceive me. I am only a maid of a wild, new country, but I understand you. You will favour me, sir, by going; and Polly shall hear of this at once."

She held herself erect, her head high, her eyes proud and flashing. She was clad in rough homespun, but for all that she bore herself like a princess.

"Well, you have a right to be proud," said he in a tone of irony. "All who see you love you—even this poor wretch of an Indian. You might spare *him*, I think."

A wave of colour swept into her face, but her eyes did not falter, and her voice, when she spoke, was clear and calm.

"Captain Ellis, you know what you say is false, that you said it but to anger me." She flung her head still higher. "But I tell you that that man, Indian though he is, is more deserving love than you, for he at least, is a true man."

The shot struck home. With blazing eyes and clenched hands, he strode toward her.

"You little fool!" he cried, "do you dare treat me thus? The day will come when you shall regret that speech; when with all your soul you will wish those words unsaid!"

She stood motionless, watching him with scorn.

"I will repeat my request, sir. Do me the honour to go, and not to return!"

She crossed swiftly to the outer door and held it open. Speechless with rage he passed her by, but at the threshold turned and said:

"You will yet remember this day with sorrow. You will pay to the full for this!"

"I shall not borrow trouble," she answered gravely, and shut the door. But when he was out of sight she stood appalled at the duty that faced her. Anger, bitterness, and fear at what Polly might do and say contended within her. At the head of the stairs she met her cousin. Polly's eyes were very bright and Hester's heart grew heavier.

"Isn't Captain Ellis here?" cried Polly eagerly. "I just came from the attic this moment, and I thought I heard his voice. But, Hester, what is the matter? Why do you look so troubled?"

"Polly—there is something that—I must tell you," said Hester; and with faltering voice she told of the scene with Ellis. She could not bear to look at her cousin, and when at last she did she was horrified at the change in the girl. Polly was pale and trembling, her eyes wide and piteous. Hester took her in her arms and drew the dark head down upon her shoulder.

"Oh, Polly, you do not really care for him? Say you do not!"

Polly's slight figure shook with bitter sobs. She raised her eyes, streaming with tears, to Hester's face.

“Oh, Hester, Hester. You know I loved him. But of course he would love you,—you are so much fairer than I. Oh, Hester, Hester, how can I bear it?”

And breaking away from her cousin's grasp she ran to her room and threw herself upon the bed. The sound of her sobs reached the girl who stood without in the hall.

CHAPTER XV

A MATTER OF CHOICE

THE fear and misery of that evening were added links in an ever lengthening chain of troubles. Polly, tossing and sobbing upon the bed, refused to be comforted; and Hester, sitting by her side, smoothed the dark hair and tried in vain to quiet her. Polly's was a passionate nature, and now she yielded in utter abandonment to her grief. Hester blamed herself bitterly for not having warned Polly against too strong an interest in the reckless young spy. To Ellis's behaviour toward herself she had paid little heed; he had showered tender glances and sweet words upon Lucy Brownson, Betty Gray, and many another pretty maid of her acquaintance; and before to-day she had looked upon his words as mere flattery. She did not guess the depth of passion that lay beneath them. This man, who thought himself invulnerable, had been conquered by the very one he had sought to vanquish; but she was wholly unconscious of her triumph.

The next two weeks were as months in the passing. Hester's perplexity in regard to her father increased with every hour. Meeting Ira Allen in the village street one day she saw the same look upon his face she had seen upon Dr. Fay's more than once since her father went away. It seemed to her at times that any news would be better than this uncertainty.

September came; with skies a deeper and more brilliant blue; warm, still days; and windy nights ablaze with stars. Cochise was often at the Robinson house. Its three inmates, left so much alone, felt a certain safety in his presence. In the evenings, now growing cool, they gathered round the fire listening to tales the young scout told of wood and lake and inland river. Little by little Hester drew from him his story, and found it strange and touching. His father had been the chief of an Iroquois tribe and his mother was of the French race, and of noble blood. Her father was a brave man and an honest, though not of high birth, and her mother had left the court of old France to share his home in the wilderness. One night the Indians fell upon the little town where her father was commandant, and by dawn the smoking ruins alone could tell of those who had perished. Three prisoners were borne by their savage captors into the great forest, one of them a girl with piteous eyes and long dark hair. When, in the horrors of

that night, amid the flames and the flying arrows, she saw her father slain and the dead on every side, she shrank with a cry of terror from the young chief whose face she had first seen in her father's garden. But he sprang with her to his horse's back; and together they threaded the dark ways of the forest. He was capable of pity, and shielded her from his savage companions; he tried to soothe her in words of quaintly spoken French. Helpless, forlorn, bereft of parents and friends, she turned to him. Could she have escaped there was no home to which she could return. Separated from all of her own blood, she at last yielded to her desolate fate and became his wife, though never reconciled to her life, speaking always in French and refusing to learn the Indian tongue. Cochise was born, and as he grew to boyhood his mother taught him what she knew of books; of cities beyond the vast woods, and of lands beyond the sea. She taught him the faith of her girlhood and the prayers of the Catholic church. After long years he still heard the music of her voice. He was a child when the great war broke out; yet he remembered well the horrors of that time, and his mother's grief when she saw the tribe go forth against her own countrymen. In that war his father died, when the boy was ten years old. His mother lived only a little longer. With all her brave spirit the hard life had killed her at last.

She died when Cochise was fourteen. With her last breath she made him promise that he would never forget his belief in God, and that he would not live his father's life.

Hester had thought of Cochise always with gratitude as a loyal friend. Now that she knew his story, deep compassion mingled with her friendship. But often as she saw him in the four weeks following the battle, he made no explanation of his attack upon Mark Ellis, nor did she seek to question him.

Friday, the 19th of September, was warm and sunny. At nine o'clock Hester went to the parlour to arrange the room for one of Aunt Jane's periodic visits, dusting the chairs and polishing the sconces on the mantel, without a glance at the tempting world outside. Her mouth was set in serious lines; her eyes held a wistful pain. Why had not Nathan Bennett returned? She was thinking it was more than a month since he went away when the front-door opened gently and a footstep crossed the hall. She did not pause in her work. It was either her mother or Polly, she thought. Presently the latch of the parlour-door was lifted, and she turned with a start. It was Nathan himself standing on the threshold. For a moment she faced him without speaking; then she almost ran toward him in her eagerness.

“Nathan!” she cried, “Nathan!”

He caught her hands and kissed them. He was brown from his ride beneath the September sun, and handsomer than ever, with a new tenderness in his dark eyes.

"Did the sprig of evergreen reach you, Hester?" he asked. "And the message that it bore? Did you keep it?"

"I kept it," she answered softly.

He drew her closer.

"Hester, Hester, do you mean this? Do you mean that you love me, Hester?"

Her eyes met his in a sweet and trustful gaze.

"I mean it, Nathan."

"Hester! That you are mine, now and forever! I have loved you, Hester, since that first day when you brought me sunshine and gave me back my lost hope. Oh, the suspense of these four weeks when I knew not whether you despised me for that letter or forgave me for the love I could not repress!"

"I forgave you," said she, smiling.

He took her in his arms and kissed her upturned face.

"You have given me more than life, Hester, more than you can ever know. If you had deserted me, I had been lost indeed! Thank heaven, what Neil Barton said was not true!"

"Neil Barton?" echoed Hester, in astonishment.

“ He said you were to be his wife. His wife ! ”

“ He said that ? ” cried Hester with rising colour. “ How dared he speak thus falsely ? ”

Nathan repeated the words spoken in that log hut at Baum’s camp, passing over, however, his own noble deed.

“ It was all untrue ! ” she cried. “ Now I know why he has come here so often of late. He sought to deceive you and tried to win a promise from me before your return. But I would not see him. I have told him again and again that I could not love him.”

“ I care not what he said, sweetheart, now that I have your love.”

“ Neil asked me once, if I were always going to wait for some dream-lover. He is come, Nathan.”

A dreamy softness in her eyes, warm colour in her cheeks, and the infinite tenderness of a noble passion revealed in every feature, never before had she been so beautiful. For a time both were silent. When at length they spoke the moments seemed too swift for what they had to say. In this their first meeting as lovers there were many questions to be asked and answered; and much to relate and explain. Nathan Bennett must tell of his escape, of the battle, the long ride southward; of how he had borne the news of Bennington fight to Washington’s army and what the great General had

said in praise of the Green Mountain Boys. As for Hester, her dread of Mark Ellis had vanished, put to flight by this great joy.

Yet in the mind of each there lurked a fear, which both shrank from disclosing; and because of it, there came a pause, which neither dared to break. At last Hester raised her head, her eyes full of piteous yearning.

"Nathan," she said, in a trembling voice, "know you nothing of father? Where he is? Why he went away? 'Tis over a month ago that he left us, and we have heard nothing from him; not one word to tell us if he be safe!"

Her words awoke in Nathan Bennett the dread that had weighed upon him for weeks;—he must tell her of her father's treachery. That it should come now! The hour of happiness just over, the sacredness of their love seemed to cry out against the cruel truth. Moreover, in the recital of Ezra's treachery he must reveal his own part of the story; his plot, his visit in disguise, his ride through the night in pursuit.

"Hester," he said slowly; "as soon as I reached the camp I heard of your father's departure, but whither he went I do not know." He spoke thus in spite of himself. "Be not anxious, Hester; in the end, all will be right."

Yet even as the words left his lips he scorned himself for his inability to do the duty that in the

end was merciful. Still keeping her hands in his, he rose and drew her closer to his side.

"Sweetheart," he said, "in two days I go westward to join Gates. But before I go, I shall come again to see you." He paused. "There is a hut in the forest three miles from here. It is well hidden among the trees, and the scouts use it as a meeting-place. Thither I go to-night to await a messenger from Stark. To-morrow, Hester, I come to bid you farewell. Oh, that the war were over and we could live together in peace!" He bent and pressed her fingers to his lips. "Farewell till to-morrow, Hester, bravest and sweetest of women. Forget not to pray for me, sweetheart."

He was gone, and Hester was left alone with her new happiness. Even her fears for her father had for the moment fled. She was the Hester of two months ago, light-hearted and without a care. She had Nathan's love; what needed she more? She might suspect Mark Ellis, but for Nathan Bennett, whose past none knew, she had nothing but boundless trust, whole-hearted love. In the light of so pure a passion no shadow of doubt could rest.

Early in the afternoon Mrs. Robinson and Polly set out for the village. In any other mood, Hester would have found the house lonely indeed; but now, though her nearest neighbours were the men in the wheat-field, a mile distant, the silence

brought her nothing but happy thoughts. Love made melody in her heart.

The sun was dropping low when the swift, sharp clatter of a horse's hoofs drew her from her dreams.

"Nathan has come back," cried her heart; and filled with delight at his return she ran, singing, down the stairway, flung wide the door and stood upon the threshold. But the song died upon her lips, and her heart sank. Motionless with the horror of her disappointment she watched Mark Ellis approach; then, too startled to close the door, or seek safety in flight, she retreated, step by step into the dusky hall. Her eyes, held by the strange fascination of fear, could not leave his face. He had the aspect of a man hard-pressed, driven to bay. He was fiercely haggard; his blue eyes wild and bright, his clothes covered with the mud and dust of a long ride. Hester was white and trembling, but she faced him bravely.

"What brings you here, Captain Ellis?" she said with a great effort to be calm.

"I am the unwilling bearer of startling news, proud maid. A fortnight past you scorned me, but now I hope you will own I am forgiving. I have travelled many a mile to save you heart-ache."

She gazed at him with wide eyes; the old dread pressing close again.

"You remember," he continued, approaching her, "that a month ago you asked of me the reason for your father's flight. I did not know it then; *now* I do. He fled because *he was a traitor!* Because if he stayed his life would have paid the forfeit!"

A sharp cry burst from Hester's lips; she drew back, shuddering, her eyes piteous in their terror. He marked with cool complacency the effect of his words.

"It is not true!" she gasped. "It is not true!"

"Do I need to convince you further? Well, then, here is proof."

And he thrust a folded paper between her fingers.

"This is to certify that whereas Ezra Robinson has proved himself a traitor to the commonwealth of Vermont, and the Continental cause it is ordered that all American scouts make diligent search for him and deliver him, if found, into the hands of the Council at Bennington.

"JOHN STARK,
"IRA ALLEN."

The paper fluttered to the ground. Like a creature stricken by a blow, she leaned back, trembling, against the wall.

"Merciful Heaven!" she moaned. "It cannot be! My father a traitor! Oh, God, it cannot be!"

Her voice ebbed away till it was almost inaudible.

"Aye, 'tis the truth; though it cuts me deep to tell it. But more than he have played with treachery. Nathan Bennett of the Rangers and that half-breed, Cochise, also are of the same stripe."

"Nathan Bennett a traitor? Never will I believe it! It is a lie!" cried Hester.

"Arguments would be wasted upon you, I see," rejoined Ellis, with a scornful smile. "I will proceed to my errand. The scouts have hunted all the country-side to find your father and these others, but in vain. *I* alone know their hiding-place, and 'tis my duty to proceed at once to their arrest. But I am merciful, though I get no thanks for it, and I will make you this proposal. I can guess what your sufferings would be should your father and Captain Bennett come to justice. 'Tis wiser, sweet maid, to choose for lover a man in the right cause. Listen to this, then. That half-breed, Cochise, is the only messenger they trust with their schemes. Were he out of the way, their mischief would cease. Here is a chance! I have heard you say that a signal in the window would bring this Indian here. Very well! to-night about ten o'clock place a lantern in the attic-window, and when he comes, keep him here under some pretext, till my men surround the house and capture him. If you con-

sent to this, I shall make no move toward the arrest of the others, and they will escape in safety. What say you to this?"

"I say that it is all false! Why do you seek to deceive me? If any man has played the traitor, it is you!"

He laughed scornfully.

"Well, then, I shall proceed upon my duty. If you don't believe me, fair cynic, there is the name of Mr. Allen on the paper."

She stared at him, utterly bewildered. Even if it were possible that her father had done this thing, it could not be that Nathan Bennett——

"It is only a matter of choice," he said carelessly. "What care you for the fate of an Indian? I promise you he shall not be killed. However, if you prefer, the Council shall have two more prisoners at dawn."

Great Heaven! if it were as this man said! Suppose her father's life were at stake! There was the paper, and all the old dread to confirm it, and to save him she must play a shameful part, betray the man who had been her friend.

"Have you made up your mind?" said Ellis, "or is it hard for you to reach a decision? I'll not wait longer now, but look you, if I find not the Indian here at ten this night, morning will see a long search ended. Adieu, fair maid."

And so he left her. Her eyes followed him

through the doorway, but her lips found no words, and she seemed powerless to move. So stunned was she, that it was not till dark had fallen and steps were heard upon the road that she stirred from her posture of mute despair. The terrible words that had crushed and blinded her were as great a mystery as before. How much was true? How much was false? She felt that Ellis sought to entrap her; but how could she free herself from a web when she could not see her way?

One moment she resolved to ride to Bennington; confide the whole matter to Stephen Fay and implore his aid; the next, she thrust the idea aside as useless; moreover, the time for action was waning fast. She lit a candle, and going to her room, flung herself on her knees beside the bed and bowed her head on her clasped hands.

“O God,” she prayed, “show me what I must do. For Christ’s sake, grant me this prayer.”

For a moment she knelt in silence, then rose with a look strangely resolute. The decision had been made.

“I must do it,” she cried, shuddering. “No other way remains.

As she passed the mirror the white face looking at her wore a new courage.

“God give me strength,” she murmured, and passed on down the stair.

CHAPTER XVI

SHALL A FRIEND BETRAY A FRIEND?

HESTER never remembered what happened in the next hour. Her mother and Polly returned from the village. She answered as in a dream. Her new-born purpose so filled her soul that all else was crowded out, and she went about her evening's work like one beneath a spell. How slowly the moments crept away! Would bedtime never come? At last on the stroke of nine windows and doors were barred, the fire was covered with ashes, and having thus fortified themselves for the night the three went, candles in hand, up the stairs. The room belonging to Hester and Polly was large and square, with wide windows facing to the east. Their solitary candle did not half light the dark spaces.

Bedtime had usually been the hour for laughter and merry whispers, but the blight had fallen, and the hour had lost its charm. In silence they put out the candle and climbed into the great four-post bed hung with muslin curtains. Hester lay still and listened. How quiet it was! The flutter

of wind in the leaves, the night cry of a far-away bird, were the only voices; of hoof-beats and clanking scabbards the still air gave no sign. Through the partly-drawn curtains shone a star, framed by the eastern window. With her eyes upon it Hester waited breathlessly. Five minutes, ten minutes, even more stole by, before Polly's regular breathing showed that she slept. Then softly and slowly, fearful at every movement lest her cousin wake, Hester raised herself in bed beside the sleeping girl. Polly's head was pillow'd on her arm, and the dark hair that lay across her breast was hardly stirred by her light breathing. Hester gazed at her for a moment, then slipped noiselessly out of bed and to the window. There was only a faint starlight without. The moon would not rise for half an hour.

She dressed as rapidly as she could in the partial darkness, and taking her shoes in her hand, crept stealthily to the door. There was need of caution, for her mother's room adjoined, and Mrs. Robinson waked easily. Hester turned the key and found herself in the wide dimness of the upper hall. She paused, but heard nothing; the house was still. She went swiftly down the stairs, groping her way with trembling fingers. The ticking of the clock was a sound to shrink from, and the brooding darkness was a horror. In the kitchen she lit a candle and hurriedly wrote some words on

a slip of paper. It was long past nine and there was no time to spare. She took down an old pistol of her father's and loaded it carefully, then blew out the candle and stood listening. Unbroken stillness. She unbarred one of the south windows, crept out and closed it after her. Once in the free air she drew a long breath; and sitting down on the grass put on her shoes. Lightly she rose and stole on through the shadows. Cold and trembling, pursued by a haunting terror, nevertheless she still held unswervingly to her errand.

When Ti was saddled and bridled, she led him over the grass, lest the sleepers in the house should waken. The horse had been ridden hard of late, and Hester needed not to be told that he could not travel far. As she made her way through the deep gloom of the orchard along the path her father had taken on the night of his departure, she tried in vain to quiet the tumultuous beating of her heart. She felt she was being entangled in the threads of some unseen plot; hunted by some foe whose face she could not see. There had been danger on the night of her ride to Stark; but not such fear as this. Yet her purpose was clear enough; to reach the hut in the forest, tell Nathan Bennett of Ellis's words, warn him of this unknown peril; above all, learn from him the truth concerning her father.

When the house was hidden from her view by the trees, she mounted, as best she could, and took

her way toward the forest, not by the open road, but along a bridle-path, winding through field and pasture. The ground grew steep and rocky, sweeping upward to meet the western hills. The valley lay below. She was now on the brink of the woods, and the flash of stars between the leaves and the pale light cast by the rising moon made the narrow roadway a grey dusk, in which all objects blended vaguely. After one hasty glance back, Hester struck *Ti* a light blow with her riding-whip, and felt her hopes rising as the horse's pace quickened. Without hood or cloak, with her long hair blown round her by the wind, and her wide eyes striving to pierce the gloom, she made a figure both brave and piteous; but if there were eyes to see they lay hidden and gave no sign. Thus far she was unpursued, but the tired horse lagged wearily and her progress was alarmingly slow. With nearly two miles of her journey still before her, this lingering pace was unendurable. And yet, so strong is love, so much the master of fear, that though her eyes kept ceaseless vigil, her mind saw not the endless arch of trees, the grey curve of the forest road, but only her lover, Nathan Bennett; she felt his touch; she heard his voice. Then suddenly a bird would cry in the tree-tops, and she was alone again, afraid of the brooding stillness.

Moved by a frightened impulse, she turned and looked over her shoulder. Against the sky at the

end of the vista rose a number of shadowy figures; horsemen without a doubt. She caught her breath sharply and struck Ti a heavy blow. The horse, startled, broke into a wild gallop, but above the sound of his hoofs she heard the beat of these other hoofs drawing ever nearer. The first rays of the rising moon pierced between the branches and shone full on her pursuers, revealing their painted faces and the feathers in their hair! From their lips came a savage cry to halt; but Hester heeded it not. With a quivering sob she crouched lower in the saddle, till she was almost upon the horse's neck. The Indians! It was not two months since Jane McCrea met a fate so terrible that her very name brought a shudder. Ti, mad with terror, and straining every nerve, swerved from side to side of the narrow road. A bullet whistled past and buried itself in a tree near by. Hester hid her face and shrank closer to the saddle; lower yet and lower till her brown curls brushed the horse's mane. Ti was flagging fast; his steady gallop had given way to uneven leaps. The riders behind were gaining swiftly.

Suddenly there came a crash in the wayside bushes and another horseman plunged into the road not twenty yards behind her. Her last hope vanished. She could feel Ti's straining breath, and knew that in a few brief moments he would fail altogether. She closed her eyes and prayed, say-

ing the words over and over again in a tense whisper; she was numb and cold and her heart beat so violently that she found it hard to breathe. In a few swift bounds the horseman reached her side. She gave one terrified glance and tried to free the pistol from its holster. This was the end, then. She felt the hot breath of her pursuer's horse; saw the rider lean from the saddle and snatch at Ti's bridle-rein, then:

"Mam'selle," cried a low voice. "Do not be afraid."

"Cochise," whispered the girl faintly, and knew that he came as her rescuer. Her heart beat fast to this new hope; she was weak with a joy as keen as pain.

"' Flying Wind' is swift," he whispered. "Take your foot from the stirrup, mam'selle, and lean toward me."

She obeyed him. For a short space the horses ran abreast, then Cochise gave Flying Wind the spur and by a sudden turn of the rein, guided him close to Hester's flagging horse. Suddenly he bent forward, lifted the girl in his arms and laid her gently across his saddle. Ti, thus abandoned, staggered onward for a few yards, then fell heavily. Straight on came the pursuers! Flying Wind, fiery and strong, shot ahead like an arrow with his double burden. Cochise, leaning forward, that he might the better shield Hester, felt a savage joy

in this mad flight; in the horse's headlong speed, the crack of the musket-shots, and the fierce thrill of danger. Hester, lying thus, could see nothing save sky and branches, and that dark face ennobled by its high resolve. The din of the pursuit came to her in confused sound. The leaves danced overhead, and the stars were wavering torches.

"Lie still, mam'selle," he warned her. "They may fire again."

Even as he spoke, a bullet hissed sharply and the horse swerved a little.

"That came close," cried Hester.

"It did no harm, mam'selle," said the young Indian. "Soon we shall leave them behind."

It was indeed true. They were now out of range of their foes, who, seeing their purpose defeated, seemed to have abandoned the chase. Flying Wind, foaming, but unexhausted, held to his rapid pace till they saw by the growing moonlight the opening in the trees and the dark walls of the hut. At the doorway Cochise halted and, springing from the saddle, lifted Hester to the ground. He pushed the door open and the two entered hastily. A couple of pine torches stuck in the wall served to light the hut, whose only furnishings were a rude chair and table. Hester stood, bewildered.

Nathan Bennett sprang to meet her.

“Great heavens, Hester, what has befallen you? What danger makes you look so pale? Tell me, Hester!”

He drew her into his arms, searching her face with anxious tenderness. She quickly freed herself from his clasp.

“Nathan, before I tell what purpose brings me here, I must speak of another thing. You ask what has befallen me? Ask rather what would *not* have befallen me, had it not been for Cochise. I should now be dead, or a prisoner.”

Her voice shook with emotion, as in a few swift words she poured out the story. Her pallor, the loose brown masses of her hair, her eyes, wide and appealing, gave her a deeper and more moving beauty than when the colour was in her cheek, her manner calm, her voice without a tremor. Cochise stood near the door, in his face no savagery, no touch of wildness; but changed and softened by the deeply tragic gaze with which he regarded her. He saw not Nathan Bennett, was not conscious of his presence. He saw only Hester. As her eyes rested upon him, she gave an exclamation and started forward.

“Oh, you are hurt!” she cried.

On his left arm above the elbow the buckskin sleeve was roughly torn and stained a dark red.

“It is nothing, mam’selle,” he said, “do not trouble.”

She took off the scarf at her neck, and with soft, swift fingers, bound it around his arm. He shrank, as he had not shrunk from the bullet, at the touch of the light fingers.

“ I know now that the shot *did* strike, but you were so brave, you would not tell,” she said softly.

“ M’sieu’ le capitaine,” said Cochise, “ I will go without and watch. When you call, I will come.”

When they were alone together, Hester turned to Nathan.

“ Now you shall know what brought me here,” and in a low voice told him all: Ellis’s threats and accusations; all the crowding fears that had burdened her heart so long. When she had finished, there was silence for a little. Her story was far easier to tell than his.

“ Hester,” he said at length, “ you have risked your life to save me, and in return I can give you nothing save the bitter truth. What I say will not only surprise, but anger you, yet I can hold it back no longer.”

Her father’s treachery; his own desire to prove it; the visit in disguise; the night of his capture; from beginning to end he spared no fragment of the truth. His voice was firm, but he could not meet her beseeching eyes. At the end he paused, then continued:

“ I know that I had no right, Hester, to declare my love; to ask your love, so long as that secret

laid untold. And yet,—and yet, I put the duty from me. I have wronged you; I have shamed myself. I dare not hope for your forgiveness. But, oh, remember, I acted only as a patriot should; my desire was to defeat a wrongful purpose, not to achieve your father's capture. Through it all, I loved *you*, Hester, and I would have given my life to save you pain!"

He was kneeling by the rude chair in which she sat. He stooped lower and gently pressed her fingers to his lips.

"Can you ever forgive me, Hester? I know it is much to ask. Oh, Hester, Hester!"

She rose and touched him lightly on the shoulder. The tears were wet upon her lashes, but her voice was clear and calm.

"Yes, I forgive you," she answered softly. "But father, father!"

Her voice broke with a sob. Nathan Bennett, rising, drew her to his side.

"Would that I might comfort you, Hester. Remember, dear heart, you are not alone; you are mine to honour and protect."

"And Captain Ellis?" she asked at length.

"Alas! It was he, I am sure, who drew your father into this affair. That it should be I who have to tell it. Mark Ellis! Mark Ellis!"

"And now he seeks your capture. Oh, Nathan, is it safe for you to remain here longer?"

"The western road is safely guarded and with Cochise to watch the eastern, I run no great risk for an hour at least. I wait only for the scouts. By midnight, I shall set off to join Gates. Oh, my darling, if only I might take you with me instead of leaving you to face this bitterness! But the camp is no place for a woman. Patience a while! The war must end at last!"

Meanwhile, Cochise, pacing to and fro in the solemn moonlight, felt only the tragic side of the great passion that filled the hearts of those within. From what he had been,—a creature meek and gentle,—he was transformed into a being possessed of furious power, consuming rage. Hester's presence; the sight of her face; the touch of her fingers, had awakened in him a mad longing for a heritage not his own, and the proud ambition of his mother's race had leaped into full play. In that hour he defied the fate that held him down, despised of all men; the fire of his French blood was kindled in him. He loved her with the passion of a strong wild soul, down-trodden and oppressed. Body and spirit, the life that was, and the hope of the life to come, he would have flung them all away at her lightest bidding; have bartered them all for the right to touch her hand, to speak her name. He knew that he hated with all his strength the man who had won her love.

He was now near the hut; so near that he could

see by the moonlight the bark on the rough logs. Hatred, envy, and fierce desire,—love's cruellest allies,—fought for the mastery. He halted, and his right hand stole down to grasp the knife at his belt. His soul cried out that Hester was his alone; his by the right of the love he bore her; by the right of that power sweeping him on to an act of mad despair. One stroke of his knife, and instead of the man who stood yonder, his love for Hester lighting his handsome face, the hut would have for guardian a silent, lifeless figure. And when he had done the deed—to seize Hester in his arms, to ride with her through the grey moonlit arch of the forest; on and on through the flitting shadows . . .

He took a step forward, then caught at the tree by his side as if to steady himself. The thought of Hester had called this savage impulse into being; it was the thought of Hester that dispelled it. Her kindness, her compassion, above all her absolute trust in him, quelled his fury, condemned him as an ingrate and a traitor. The madness of his passion fell from him suddenly, but in its place penitence and utter shame crushed him with their weight. He bowed his head like a man dishonoured; his spirit knelt in anguish at her feet. How still was the forest; how bright the moonlight! Yet here in the heart of the sleeping wood there had been a defeat and a victory.

How little guessed the two within the hut what storm of passion swept the heart of that silent watcher. The whirlwind had been close at hand, but they knew it not.

When the time came for parting, they left the hut in silence and crossed the little clearing to where, on the edge of the woods, Cochise was waiting with the horses. At some distance from the lonely figure they paused. For the last time Nathan Bennett clasped Hester in his arms; for the last time stooped to kiss her face.

“God bless you, Hester,” he whispered tenderly, “I leave you in His care. Farewell, sweetheart, farewell!”

They did not speak again till the clearing lay behind them and they had entered the deeper darkness beneath the trees. Then Nathan Bennett drew Cochise a little apart, and clasping the Indian’s hand in his, told him all that the evening had revealed.

“Braver maid does not live,” he ended gravely. “Had she not dared this ride, we had both been prisoners. And you, Cochise! I cannot thank you for saving that life which is dearer to me than all others.”

“No thanks do I deserve, M’sieu’,” the Indian answered. “They are all for,” his voice grew lower still and ended in a whisper, “for Mam’selle Hestér.”

" You have said that you would take her safely home, Cochise, and I trust her to your care. We should start at once, I think. Ah, yonder come the scouts!"

Five minutes later Nathan Bennett and his comrades were tramping westward along the road that led to Saratoga, while Hester and Cochise made their way across the hills toward Bennington. They went slowly, of necessity, following a round-about road. The young Indian, walking at the horse's head, kept a keen watch upon all sides; but they met no foes and the moonlit valley seemed never more calm. They had gone some time in silence when Cochise spoke:

" Mam'selle Hestér," he said softly, " I have heard of your goodness, of how you saved le capitaine Bennett and me from those who wished to make us prisoners. Oh, mam'selle, that you should do so great a thing for such as I!"

Her eyes rested upon him with deep compassion.

" I should have been a traitress; a thing worthy to be despised, had I done what Captain Ellis asked. Shall a friend betray a friend?"

It was midnight when they reached the brook below the hill. The house before them towered dark and silent; evidently the sleepers had not wakened. At the porch Cochise lifted Hester from the saddle.

She turned and put her hand in his.

“ You go westward with Captain Bennett to join the army, do you not ? ”

“ Yes, mam’selle,” he answered.

“ It may be long ere we shall meet again, but I shall not forget you.”

The pallor of the moonlight fell about her. Cochise gazed deeply at her. “ Mam’selle,” he said softly, “ by day and by night I will pray that the Merciful One keep you safely.”

“ And I,” she answered slowly, “ I pray that God may reward you.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHEATHED SWORD

INTRENCHED among the hills that guard the western border of the Hudson the two armies lay; face to face now for the last time. Throughout the past weeks the distance between them had been lessening, till, with the waning summer, they met upon the final battle-ground.

It was the beginning of the end. The English army, brought to bay upon the heights of Saratoga, surrounded upon all sides, without a single pathway for escape, yielded at last to the inevitable, and determined to treat for surrender.

In the brilliant sunlight of an autumn afternoon the Americans were drawn up in two long lines beside the road. Between those silent ranks there passed with slow and sullen steps the troops whose coming had spread terror through the north! There on the heights of old Saratoga, amid the changing splendours of the autumn woods, had been acted the last scene in the drama.

Late that evening Nathan Bennett, making a reconnoissance from the camp, was returning

through the strip of forest which skirted the river a mile above the patriot lines. It was one of those frosty autumn nights, intensely calm, when the wind has died away, and the earth is wrapped in a mantle of chill white moonlight. He walked slowly and thoughtfully, but not unhappily, hoping in his heart that the war was near its end. Since his recent mission to Washington's army, since Hester's acceptance of his love, the old despair had begun to loose its hold upon him.

It was a life of mingled joys and sorrows that Nathan Bennett looked back upon.

His father had been a tea merchant of old Salem, and one of his earliest memories was of the Salem wharves and ships. His mother was still a warm and sweet reality in his mind. Her very presence had spoken of tenderness, and never even in his darkest hours had her memory ceased to visit him. She was a Puritan by birth, and yet somehow she blent with stern virtues the sweetness of sacred womanhood. In her youth she had been very fair, and even passing years had not taken away her loveliness. Nathan's brother George, her eldest born, was said to bear great resemblance to her, but Nathan bore her greater love. As boys the two brothers were ever together; there was not two years' difference in their ages, and there was scarcely a joy they did not share. Until the hardening years had done their

work, there was much in George that was winning and lovable, for he was frank and fearless, and there was nothing he would not dare. He took the leadership in all boyish sports, and many a time had Nathan held his breath to see him poised for some madcap adventure. And yet through all Nathan's admiration he was conscious of a deeper sense of passionate love, an affection more like that of a mother for her child, than that of boy for boy. He tried in every way to shield him, and took the blame of many a reckless escapade. He knew not when it was that they began to drift apart; but he remembered a day in school when he noticed something not quite honourable in his brother's dealings. He remonstrated, and received a promise that it should not happen again. If only that promise had been kept!

When Nathan recalled the blue-eyed boy who used to breast the seas of old Salem, and thought of the man he was to know again in after years, the difference was so great he shuddered. What power could have worked that change! Nathan thought the thing that had warped his brother's sense of honour was but his unchecked waywardness, grown beyond all rightful limits. He was always stubborn, and would have his will at any cost. His father never said him nay, for he could see no fault in him, and though his mother understood him better, even she never dreamed of the

depths of which he was to prove himself capable. Thank God she never lived to see his downfall!

When George was sixteen he went away to Cambridge, much to Nathan's wretchedness, although he himself was to follow in a year. But when George returned at Christmas the younger brother felt the dread of more than separation, for there had come a subtle change. The elder boy was wilder and more wayward, and spent night after night at cards or in the tavern.

Six years passed. George was in business with his father, who had been in need of an assistant, for the tea trade was becoming difficult; that was the year of the "Boston Tea Party." The war was then a distant cloud, of whose portentous growth no one ever guessed. Nathan had just completed college, and returned home with the intention of studying law. About a month after Nathan's twenty-first birthday George became restless and perplexed; all of which was laid to the difficulties of the trade. He had several times borrowed money of Nathan, asking him not to mention it to their father; saying that he had found a debt of some years' standing connected with the business, and did not wish to trouble his father with it. So Nathan suspected nothing; out of a clear sky fell the thunderbolt.

One night late in spring Nathan was summoned to his father's room; he found him writing by the

light of two tallow dips, but the instant Nathan entered he laid by his pen, and drew his heavy eyebrows to a deeper frown. Nathan saw at once that something was portending. His father did not rise, but sat regarding him sternly. They had never understood each other.

The scene lingered still in Nathan's memory. His father had missed from his money-chest the sum of one hundred pounds. The theft had been committed three days before, evidently by someone well acquainted with both chest and keys. The servants denied all knowledge of the deed, but one of them declared that he had seen Nathan leave the house that night; while George had heard footsteps at the same hour! The father spoke accusingly, and Nathan saw that he was suspected of the theft. Indignant at the implication, he strove for calmness and set his mind to untangle the matter. He knew well that he had not left the house that night; and could only surmise that someone else had been mistaken for him. Then suddenly he read the mystery, and yet even in his first moment of passionate horror at such an act he never thought of betraying George. In the midst of his anger his old affection lived unchanged; and he determined to shield him at any cost. Although he denied any connection with the affair, he took care to show no suspicions that could point to his brother; and this proved his

undoing. He presented, no doubt, the picture of guilt, for at his first misgivings of the truth he had turned white, and in agitation dared not meet his father's eyes. Doubts were confirmed, and rage was kindled to full heat. He never forgot how his father, springing to his feet, accused him of the robbery, and ordered him to leave his house forever! Nor should he ever forget his last meeting with his mother. He found her waiting for him in his room, a candle held between her trembling fingers, the great tears streaming down her cheeks. She had heard all that passed. But though her agony was so great that he feared it would kill her, she saw that his departure was inevitable, and helped him to prepare for it. Even to her he did not tell the truth; never from his lips should she hear the tale of her son's dishonour! When all was ready for flight she went with him to the door, and there she put her arms around his neck, and whispered, sobbing, "Nathan, I know that you are guiltless; your father will one day learn of his mistake. But if the whole world should condemn you, yet would I believe you innocent. God protect you, Nathan, and farewell!"

He left her standing in the doorway. It was a sweet spring night, lighted by a faint young moon. At the end of the lane he turned for a last look at the old house, shining amid the snow-white orchard trees, and so disowned, nay more, dis-

honoured, took his leave. Never had he beheld it since, save in his dreams.

He had relatives in New York city, and to them he went, receiving a kind welcome. He took up the study of law and tried to dispel the past by hard labour, though he succeeded but indifferently. At intervals he received a loving letter from his mother, but though she wrote so hopefully, he could see that his father's mind remained unaltered. So two long years went by, and then one startled April day there came the news of Lexington. His father's sympathy had ever been with the King, while Nathan was heart and soul with the colonists. He desired to enlist in the State of his birth, and so at once set off for Cambridge. On the very day he entered the Continental army, whom should he come upon but his brother George! George appeared delighted to see him, expressed his regret at Nathan's leaving home, and then to the latter's utter astonishment confessed to having taken the money. He said that from fear of discovery he had mentioned hearing footsteps, but had known nothing of the servant's testimony, and had not meant to incriminate Nathan. He promised to write to his father and tell him all the truth.

Time passed. The brothers were together at the siege of Boston and the battle of Long Island; and were a part of the army that retreated through

the Jerseys in the fall of '76. Then after Trenton they went into winter quarters at Morristown. It was in March that an event occurred which left an even deeper scar upon his life. The colonel of the regiment in which George and he were captains missed some valuable papers, including maps and drawings of their lines, and he had every reason to suspect a traitor. He questioned his officers to no effect, and as a last resource ordered every tent in the regiment to be searched. The papers were found in Nathan's tent. It was but another version of the cup in Benjamin's sack; what hand had placed them there he did not know, but once again all his suspicions pointed to his brother. He had had doubts of George's loyalty, yet he could not have proved his guilt had he desired it; and so he stood condemned, helpless to prove his innocence. He was tried by court-martial and found guilty, despite the fact that many of his comrades thought him blameless. On the night after the trial there visited him a young officer who had long been his staunch friend. He promised to help him escape beyond reach of capture should he consent to flight. He considered the proposal well; if he stayed his fate was certain; if he fled he should assert his guilt; on both sides lay dis-honour, but on one was life. To stay would be but useless sacrifice. He consented to his plan, and that night, wrapped in the sentry's cloak,

passed unnoticed through the lines. He reached New England safely, and while in hiding there heard of his mother's death. Crushed by this blow, he cared but little what befell him. Was ever man in worse plight! He desired above all things to fight for his country, and yet to join her army would mean death!

In his despair there came the thought of the Grants as a refuge, with their comparative isolation from the rest of the country. He might yet serve the cause he loved, for Burgoyne's proposed invasion was the principal theme of the day. So he fared cautiously northward, arriving in Bennington in May of that fateful year.

Lost in these memories, Nathan looked out upon the silvery-grey of the river, then, suddenly remembering the lateness of the hour, he resumed his way through the wood at a swifter pace. As he strode along he caught sight of a figure stealing cautiously among the trees to his right. Thinking it might be a deserter, he called a sharp summons to "Halt," and ran forward to intercept him. The man thus arrested wheeled about sharply, and sprang forward with drawn sword. So unexpected was the movement that Nathan had barely time to escape injury by a dexterous backward step. In a flash his own sword was out, leaping to meet the blade of his opposer. But while his eyes observed the other's every movement, and every turn

of his own wrist and body obeyed his will, he found chance to think how strange a thing was this midnight encounter, this duel between men who had never met before. There in the gloom of the wood they fought with calmness and a desperate skill. Save for the clink of steel upon steel and the low sound of quickened breath, the two might have been the ghosts of rivals dead and gone. Nathan Bennett saw that with all his knowledge of sword-play he was near being outmatched by the man before him. As a boy he had been taught the art by a French master and there was one trick he had never seen practised this side the water, except by his brother George and himself. As he made this well-remembered thrust his enemy's sword parried the stroke with instant comprehension. Nathan Bennett felt his heart leap and his hands grow cold. He knew but one man in America to whom the trick was known, and he—There may be others, of course, but—

By now their shifting movements had brought them to a little clearing, where the branches, bared of leaves, let through a flood of moonlight. In it his opponent stood revealed. That straight lithe figure, that handsome scornful face, could belong to but one man in the world! Nathan Bennett gazed with new pain and wonder into the face of him who had last been known, in Bennington, as Mark Ellis.

Without a word he sheathed his sword. Ellis broke the silence with a laugh:

“What is that for, Captain? Why not fight it out?”

Nathan Bennett raised his head with a look strangely compounded of anger and regret. Ellis knit his brows in mock perplexity and ran his fingers along his shining blade.

“Is it a riddle to be guessed?” he asked.

He was clad in the scarlet and buff of the British uniform, its gold lace catching the moonlight with a flash. He stood there proud and insolent, awaiting his answer.

“If ‘tis a riddle,” said Nathan Bennett, “‘tis a riddle as deep as life itself.”

“Or of death,” replied Ellis, “if you wait but long enough. It might have been solved to-night were it not for your scruples.”

“You have asked me a question,” said Nathan Bennett, “now I shall ask you one: why are you here in this wood? The British army is on its way to Boston, and the British officers are at Gates’ headquarters. What purpose have you here?”

“Indeed,” returned Ellis, with a smile, “I should by rights be over yonder in your camp, but having a desire to see our old lines again, and being, moreover, on my way to join the army of which you spoke, I made bold to venture hither.”

"If Gates knew of your doings in a certain town to the eastward, your uniform would not protect you. I advise you not to play the spy again. Though you tried to capture me there, though you brought grief to the woman I love, and ruin to her father, I warn you of your danger. Play not the part once too often!"

"I give you a thousand thanks for your kindness," returned Ellis mockingly. "And now shall we separate? I fear the hour grows late."

Nathan Bennett, with the old bitterness upon his face, the old bitterness that had slept and now had wakened, watched his brother disappear among the lofty columns of the trees, and when the figure had gone bowed his head upon his hands, and stood motionless. He left the wood an hour later, when the waning moon had mounted to mid-heaven and the faint line of hills against the eastern sky showed dimly. Hope was far removed from him. It belonged only to that far-away town in the shade of the distant hills. Here was despair and the weight of a great bitterness.

As he crossed the hill he could see the tents of the victorious army, and all along the moonlit river he could hear the sentries crying:

"Past two o'clock, and victory is ours!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GODS OF THE HILLS

SINCE you proposed this measure, Mr. Allen, I fail to see how you can with any consistency vote against it."

It was Thomas Chittenden who spoke, rapping his fingers on the table to emphasise his words.

Ira Allen bit his lips; then paused and raised his pen above the paper he was signing.

"You will admit, Mr. Chittenden," he said quietly, "that any rule may have an exception, and that it may be as unjust to enforce a law in some cases as it would be wrong to neglect it in others."

"Granted, Mr. Allen," returned the other gravely. "And yet in a case like this, where treason has been plotted in the very midst of us, it seems to me we should deal stern justice to the offender."

It was November, 1777; and the Council was still in session at Bennington. The scene had changed indeed since the sultry August weather of Stark's victory; the locusts outside the window were bare of leaves, and the autumn rain was falling in long gray lines. Ezra Robinson's deed had been made known to the Council and the town.

And now the question that Ira Allen had dreaded so long had been raised; the question as to whether the property of the traitor should not be seized by the State. The evidence given by Nathan Bennett, the papers found in Baum's possession, the flight of the man himself, were sufficient proofs of his guilt. What reason could be urged against the proper punishment of his treachery? Yet it seemed to the young Secretary, sitting pen in hand in the Council-room, with eyes on the small-paned window and the gloom of the autumn rain, that there were many reasons why the new-made law should not be carried out. He remembered Hester's brave ride to Stark, and the pledge of friendship he himself had made that night. Then, too, it seemed a cruelty, a thing beyond all justice, not touching the traitor, but laying its heavy burden on the innocent, to leave this family homeless and forlorn. He knew of no place to which they could go, unless it should be to Stephen Fay, and the crowded tavern would be a sad apology for the house they had known as home.

The long winter went by slowly. How vastly different it was, thought Hester sadly, from any winter she had ever known. Before, the short cold days had been bright enough with happiness and content. But now, when the snow shut them in, the loneliness and silence were unbearable. From morning to night Mrs. Robinson hardly spoke,

and Polly, once the gayest of the household, was sad and listless, with lips that never parted in song or laughter. Though others made merry now and then, Polly and Hester, once so eagerly welcomed, were no longer bidden to join the festivities of old Bennington. They saw little of their former acquaintances. Never, since the day when first the shameful news had been whispered abroad, had Neil Barton drawn rein at the Robinson house, and even visits from Aunt Jane were less frequent. Save when Stephen Fay or one of his sons rode over for a few hours, the three women found themselves shut out from all kindly intercourse, left alone alike by kinsfolk and by friends. To Hester the shame was far more bitter than the loneliness. During her rare visits to the town she read in the scornful or averted faces of those she passed how deep a disgrace had befallen her. Even the strength of her love could not always triumph over the surrounding gloom. For the slowly moving weeks told her nothing of Nathan Bennett. No news from father or lover pierced the circle of silence that hemmed her in.

The lingering northern winter waned at last. On the 12th of March, 1778, the commonwealth of Vermont began its formal existence as a State. Thomas Chittenden, that "man of integrity, distinguished for wisdom," was chosen Governor; and the first legislature began its regular session at

Windsor on the Connecticut. The month was nearly gone when the Council met for important discussion at "Captain Fay's" in Bennington, intent upon settling a matter long delayed.

So it happened that on a windy day late in March Dr. Fay and Hester rode eastward along the road to Bennington. He had ridden over an hour earlier with the news that the Council was to meet that afternoon, and she had insisted upon returning with him to town, to await their decision. From time to time he gave a glance of keen pity at the girl beside him. He himself had told her that there was no hope. Wrapped in a thick cloak, her face half-concealed by her hood, Hester kept a steady mournful gaze on the cold hills before her. But twice during the ride did she break silence, and then she spoke, not of the subject uppermost in her mind, but of some trivial thing.

Upon reaching the Tavern Hester stole upstairs and seated herself by a window; the same window from which she had watched the passing of Stark's army. She caught her breath at the remembrance and set her lips tighter.

When the Council met that afternoon Dr. Fay and his brother were not present. They were too magnanimous to let the memory of their father's wrong move them one inch from what they knew was right. The Governor, rising, read the motion

that the land and property of Ezra Robinson should be forfeited to the State. No cruelty or injustice was purposed, he said, for it was the intention of the Council that a sufficient sum of money should be paid yearly to the family of the traitor, and that a vote of thanks should be given to Miss Hester Robinson in acknowledgment of her bravery. But that they could overlook so great an offence was impossible. If punishment were not dealt, every Tory in the State would be plotting treason.

When he had finished there was deep silence for a moment. Then Ira Allen rose, the hot blood flushing his face.

“Gentlemen,” he said firmly, a touch of proud displeasure in his voice, “I see you are agreed. My opinion you already know. As you wish to make this vote unanimous, my presence is not needed, and I beg leave to withdraw.”

He bowed, and, turning, passed slowly from the room. It was Stephen Fay who told the decision to Hester. Tenderly he took her hands in both of his, and drew the girlish figure to his side.

“Little one,” he said, “it has gone against us, but we’ll not lose hope.” Then as he saw in the dusky light the deepening pallor of her face, “I have a feeling that ‘twill all come right yet. Courage, brave little maid.”

But for all his cheering words she was dazed

with despair, longing to rest her head upon that kindly shoulder and burst into tears. But with an effort she controlled herself.

“ You are very kind, Uncle Stephen; I will try to hope. I must start for home now. Mother will be so anxious.”

She spoke in a slow monotonous voice, repeating the words mechanically. Home! She had no longer any home.

It appeared that Dr. Jonas had been called away for an hour; and Hester could not bear to wait till his return. She slipped, unnoticed, down the stairs, climbed into the saddle, and rode forlornly up the hill beneath the drooping elms. When at last she was out of the village, and her horse was plodding slowly through the deep mud of the forest road, she gave way to bitter tears. She felt utterly deserted, without a friend to whom she could turn for help. Stephen Fay, she knew, would be their protector; would stand between them and want. She did not know how her father had wronged him, but she shrank in any case, with all the pride of her nature, from appealing to him for aid. Yet there was no other way. The farm was all they had, and now they had lost it.

Presently through the opening in the woods rose the house on the hill. The sight of the home that so soon would be home no longer dealt the last blow of misery. For a moment she gazed up

at it, with eyes that could not see for tears, then, dismounting, flung herself on the ground at the foot of a great pine, pressing her cheek against the cold gray moss and weeping bitterly. She was an exile, an alien in her own country. Although she told herself that the Council had acted justly, yet now in her bitterness her heart cried out in resentment against them. The thought of their proffered aid stung her fiercely. "Do they think us beggars, that they should treat us thus?" she cried aloud, the pained colour burning her face. The words ended with a sob. She was too weary for the anger to last; lingering only like a tired child to weep herself into forgetfulness. Again the brown woods wavered through a mist of tears, and her head sank forward upon her arms.

As she sat thus, the steady beat of a horse's hoofs was borne to her through the stillness. Ashamed that anyone should find her weeping, she sprang to her feet, brushing the mould and dead leaves from her skirt. She was none too soon, for at that moment a horseman became visible through the thin screen of maple boughs that partly hid the eastern curve of road. Ira Allen had left the Tavern only a few minutes after her departure, and had ridden fast in the hope of overtaking her. At the sight of the girl standing against the sombre background of the pine he gave a start, then dismounted and advanced toward her, hat in hand.

She read sympathy in his face, and in the gentle deference of his manner.

"Miss Robinson," he said in a low voice, taking her hand as he spoke, "I can never express my regret for what has happened to-day. They will yet repent the step," he continued with emphasis.

"There will come a time when they will see the matter as I do. Miss Robinson, I have failed in this, but if in other ways you have need of help, I stand ever ready to do your bidding."

The sight of Hester and Ira Allen together brought Mrs. Robinson to the door, unprepared for bad tidings. The news produced the effect that Hester had feared; for days her mother was as one stunned, and sat hour after hour staring blankly about her, with Polly sobbing by her side. The weight of numberless household cares thus fell upon Hester alone, affording her some relief from utter hopelessness. It had been decided that the three should take up their abode at Stephen Fay's, making the best they could of the two rooms that he could spare them. To Hester, remembering her father's hatred for this man, it seemed an irony of Fate that Stephen Fay should support the family of one who had borne him such enmity. She prayed that her father might somehow learn of their condition. He was in New York, rumour said.

The last precious days in the old house went by,

relentless in their flight. The snow was gone from the valley, but it lingered still, as if loath to depart, on the pine-robed hills near Bennington. The sun of April wakened and warmed the earth, but brought no joy to the hearts of the homeless. Better to them the gloomy autumn weather than this return of hopeful life that seemed to mock their sadness.

Two days before the time set for their departure Captain Gray of Arlington alighted at the door with a written message for Hester from Miss Jane. The contents were sufficiently astonishing.

“ You can have a Home with me, child,” so ran her aunt’s stiff writing, “ but you will have to put up with my Way of Living. It shall not be said that I did not offer Shelter to my Kin. You are a Robinson, and need not be Ashamed of the Name, though your father did so Wickedly disgrace it. I am sure I shall not regret this Step, for you have Intelligence in a large Measure, and a leaning toward Industry, (though this latter quality has not been Encouraged). You may inform Stephen Fay, Esquire, that I prefer my niece, (being a Robinson) should have other Shelter than a Tavern where Spirituous Liquors are Served to the Ungodly.” [Miss Jane had a feud of long standing with the house of Fay.]

“ I have the Honour to Subscribe myself, etc.

“ Postscript—Send Answer by Bearer and let him warm himself by the Fire. I will Postpone the Vernal Cleaning till you come.”

This epistle, sprinkled with capitals and family pride, would have drawn instant laughter from Hester under any other circumstances. Even as it was she could hardly repress a smile. She gave Captain Gray a seat by the fire—according to her aunt's concise directions—and showed the letter to her mother. While Mrs. Robinson puzzled over Miss Jane's obscure hand Hester had already made a decision. Unpleasant as it might be for her to live with her aunt, hard as it would be to leave her mother and Polly, it was nevertheless her duty to accept this offered assistance, thereby lightening the burden of Stephen Fay. She understood too well her aunt's peculiarities to wonder that Miss Jane had not included the rest of the household in the invitation. And before her mother could say her nay, the girl had given the Captain her answer of acceptance.

But when, four days later, she left her mother and cousin at the Catamount Tavern and set out for Arlington with Stephen Fay, her courage almost forsook her. Something caught her breath when she tried to speak, and she dared not look at her uncle as they turned their horses from the village street, for her eyes were brimming with tears. It was late in April. Everywhere the fields were dappled with vivid tints of the young grass, and in the woods hepaticas, the hue of apple-buds, bloomed beneath the last year's leaves. It was

past noon when they entered the town of Arlington. At the beginning of the long street they drew rein to drink from the well where Ethan Allen and his cousin, Seth Warner, had been wont to quench their thirst when returning from "Bennington Hill." Miss Jane's abode was at the western end of the town, at no great distance from Abel Hawley's tavern, where Hester remembered that Mark Ellis had once lodged. Before they reached the dwelling-place of her eccentric relative Hester reined in her horse, and Stephen Fay, dismounting, kissed her a loving farewell.

"Keep up courage, dear little maid," he said. "And remember if life becomes too hard with Miss Jane, there will be always love and a welcome beneath the sign of the Catamount."

Miss Jane received her niece, whom she had not seen since the week of Stark's victory, with grim kindness, remarking as she greeted her with a chilly kiss, that the Robinsons had fallen upon hard times.

"Oh, Aunt Jane, that is not the worst part," cried Hester with gathering tears. "The worst part is that a Robinson should be a traitor!"

"Umph!" snorted her aunt, "others must eat the same sour fruit. I see that good-for-nothing Levi Allen has joined the enemy. The fur will fly when Ethan returns, if I'm not greatly mistaken. He always said Levi was 'unstable as

water, thou shalt not excel,' to quote the Bible in which he believes not, the bold infidel!" returned Miss Jane; while Hester, had she not known the facts of the case, would have been at a loss to discover for which of the two brothers the last epithet was intended.

"Now, child," continued Miss Jane, "none dwell idle beneath my roof. Go to your room, but make haste with your unpacking, for the afternoon is scarce begun and much may be done 'twixt now and sundown."

Miss Jane was well-to-do according to the standard of those times, though with what degree of wealth the townsfolk never knew, for she kept her affairs to herself, affirming that it was no man's business whether she was rich or poor. Her comfortable abode would have done justice to the labours of a Dutch housewife, for she and her maid, Belinda, a dignified damsel of five and thirty, "spent their time in nothing else" but hunting intrusive cobwebs and pursuing rebellious dirt. Now that Hester had arrived, the "Vernal Cleaning" went merrily on, and the long spring days were filled with the sounds of shaking and scrubbing, drowning the bird-songs in the orchard.

Few chances did Hester have of visiting Bennington, for Miss Jane deemed idleness a crime, and considered the Decalogue wanting in at least one commandment; but one Sunday, the last day of

May, amid the quiet of a Puritan Sabbath, she rode over. The sun was creeping slowly toward the rim of western hills, and the drowsy warmth of a day in late spring was merged into the coolness of coming night. All along the street the blossoming orchards lifted their clouds of rose-colour and fragrant snow, filling the air with the exquisite odour of the apple-blooms. The heavy scent of the syringas mingled with it, while every breeze brought new perfumes from the gardens. The locusts on the hill above the Tavern were in flower, and the road beneath was snowy with the drift of white petals. Beyond, the fields were starry with buttercups, and pink wild-roses nodded in the grey of the wayside wall. The clouds in the west blossomed also in garnet and amber-gold. A group on the porch of the Catamount Tavern watched the splendour in silence. Mrs. Robinson let her Bible slip from between her fingers; Polly clasped both hands above her dark head and gazed at the west, while Hester, sitting beside Stephen Fay, resting from her ride, drew a breath of momentary happiness.

Before long the stillness was rudely broken by the sound of running feet, and down the hill toward the Tavern came David Fay, panting and excited. Reaching the startled group he swung his hat, and shouted loudly, without checking his course down the street.

“Hurrah! Hurrah! Ethan Allen is coming!
Ethan Allen is coming!” he cried.

Stephen Fay sprang to his feet, as did the others. Rushing into the road, he shaded his eyes with his hand and stared up the blossoming archway, down which three horsemen were riding, their horses covered with dust, as from a long journey. There was no mistaking Ethan Allen, even in that dim light. Before the horsemen had time to draw rein beneath the Catamount men could be seen running toward the Tavern from every direction. Hatless, some of them coatless, they crowded up the road, rending the Sabbath quiet with their shouts of delight.

“Ethan Allen! Ethan Allen! Welcome to old Bennington! God bless you, Ethan, old boy, just let me shake your hand! The Yorkers haven’t swallowed us yet, thanks to you, Ethan!”

They pressed close to his horse’s side, joy in every face.

The man they cheered sat silent for a moment, hardly answering their shouts. Perhaps the sweet reality of the home-coming shook even his strong spirit. From the roof of the Catamount Tavern the breeze caught and tossed into rippling beauty the Flag of the Old Thirteen! The slender circle of stars shone white as mist in the twilight, the silver and crimson bars fluttered softly as with life. The man who had been a captive for nearly three

long years stared up at it with trembling lips, his dark head bare.

“ God’s blessing on it, men ! ” he cried in a husky voice. “ When first I saw it there at Valley Forge I knew why men loved Freedom, for that was Freedom’s self ! May the day never dawn when that Flag shall be lowered to a foe, be they curséd British or—— ”

He broke off suddenly and turned to greet the men who gathered about him.

Although he sat his horse so straight, his tall powerful figure was pitifully thin and gaunt from what it had been three years earlier; the suit of grey broadcloth, furnished him while a prisoner by some friends in Ireland, did not fit him closely. Moreover there were deep and cruel hollows beneath his bold dark eyes, and when he extended his hand to grasp that of Stephen Fay heavy marks were revealed upon his wrist where the iron had worn into the flesh. But however great his bodily suffering, the spirit of the man was unchanged; the spirit that English prisons and English chains, and English threats of a shameful death, could not crush or conquer.

By now the street was thronged with hurrying townsfolk, both men and women; each one eager to grasp his hand, to look into his face. With a friendly gesture he introduced his fellow-travellers as comrades in his captivity, come home with him

to "the Grants" to learn "what manner of men they were who had conquered Lord Burgoyne."

Then, dismounting, he walked up the path to the Tavern. At the threshold he turned and looked back at the familiar scene; the darkening street, the friendly faces.

"Boys," he cried, "to think I'm back again in old Bennington! There's not a spot on earth like this land which the Lord our God hath given us to possess!"

The news of his return ran like flame from end to end of the little town, till joy sought some stronger form of utterance. Some of the younger men urged that cannon should be fired, and though at first their elders hesitated on the ground of disturbing the Sunday quiet, all scruples vanished in the flood of wild rejoicing. Dr. Fay and a dozen of his townsmen ran swiftly up the hill to the store-houses. The old six-pounder brought from Fort Hoosick in '72 to be used against Governor Tryon, spoke right royally now, the echoes answering all along the valley. The rude invasion of the Sabbath evening reached the ears of Parson Dewey, where he sat in an upper chamber, and brought him to his feet, exclaiming that "nothing less than the arrival of the bold infidel" could have occasioned this disturbance; and forthwith he sallied forth to seek him and those "men of Belial" who celebrated his return in the old Tavern.

By dawn Bennington was overflowing with friends and neighbours come to greet their hero. Herrick's Rangers marched in review, toasts were drunk in the Council-room, and the ancient cannon thundered forth a salute of fourteen guns—thirteen for the New Republic, and one for young Vermont! What wonder that they loved him, those "turbulent sons of freedom," the man who had so often risked his life in their common cause, wresting their hard-won lands from the hand of the despoiler, fighting tooth and nail for the rights that were justly theirs! What wonder that they shouted forth his name, linking it with that of the State he loved, till the air shook with the words: "Vermont and Ethan Allen! Vermont and Ethan Allen!"

Late that afternoon when the tumult had a little subsided, Stephen Fay called Hester into the garden.

"Little one," he said, "I have a gleam of hope. I spoke to Colonel Allen about you, and he seemed greatly interested. If anyone can help you, he is the man. So strong is his influence now, that he can accomplish wonders!"

"But, Uncle Stephen," exclaimed Hester, "you know how he hates Tories, and to think that he would help the family of—" She hesitated and did not finish.

"But he is just," cried Stephen Fay, "more just

than the most perfect balance! Did you never hear that story of how a few of our people were trying to defraud some of the New York settlers in our State, and how when Ethan Allen heard it he told the Yorkers he would punish the offenders and see justice done? That is his greatest power—his love of justice.” He paused, looking up reverently at the shining folds of the wind-tossed flag. “The God in whom he trusted brought him back in safety. The ‘gods of the hills,’ whose aid he once invoked, have saved him from his enemies. Well may Vermont rejoice, for Ethan Allen is come to his own again!”

CHAPTER XIX

THE MESSAGE OF COCHISE

THE excitement of that first day of June lasted throughout the summer. Although there was no need to prepare for battle, as there had been a year before, there were many and varied interests to fire the public spirit. As most of these were peculiar to Bennington, Hester knew of them only by hearsay, but they lost no vividness by repetition. The trial and execution of that "inimical" individual, David Redding, the only person ever hanged for treason in Vermont, furnished sufficient fireside talk for a year; and although the State was agreed that his fate was only just, Hester shuddered at the thought that her father, had he been captured, would have met a fate as terrible. Despite Stephen Fay's hopeful words, the desolation of her lot weighed heavily upon her, crushing out the girlish happiness that should rightfully have been hers. Her aunt's oddities she could easily bear. Her mother's complainings, and her new sense of dependency upon others, made life, that before had been one long romance, a hard problem to be solved.

Mrs. Robinson continually lamented that Hester had not married Neil Barton, and so saved them from all this misery.

"To think that we might be dwelling in wealth and comfort instead of living upon our relatives," she would say mournfully. "You will never hear of Captain Bennett again. All this has come from your wilfulness in pledging yourself to a man of whom you knew nothing. Neil is both respectable and well-to-do; if you had married him, we should not be scorned as we are by everybody. I am sure he regards us with friendship, despite your behaviour toward him, for twice has his mother bidden us to tea."

And this in substance she would repeat again and again, while Hester listened without replying. Whether from a desire to be of a contrary opinion or for other reasons, Miss Jane espoused her niece's choice with much energy. She had seen Nathan Bennett only once, but she liked him.

"You were right to accept Captain Bennett, child. I approve of it most highly. As to hearing no word from him, you cannot expect, in these days when the enemy is always hovering about, to be receiving letters. He's not forgotten you, child, I'll warrant. You have shown discernment worthy of your name. If you *must* marry, take a man of spirit and intelligence. Neil Barton! Fiddlesticks! All there is good of Neil Barton

is his mother and his money. If you've got to live with a man all his days, it is not his mother or his money that concerns you, but himself. Some fools think otherwise, but that is my opinion. Marriage, child, is not to be entered into lightly or un-advisedly, but," here Miss Jane paused to inspect an errant cobweb, sporting out of reach above her head, and in so doing lost her thread of speech. "La, child," she resumed, "Neil Barton, taken by himself, is as mean-souled and conceited as any creature endowed with the breath of life! And that's the whole of my mind on the subject."

Subsequent events proved Miss Jane correct, for when, early in June, the Robinson farm was advertised for sale, Neil Barton appeared as purchaser. A few days later Hester met him face to face upon the street of Bennington. He bowed to her with an air of condescension.

"Our positions have altered, Miss Robinson," he observed. "Scorner and scorned appear to have changed places. Had you thought me worthy to have married you, the farm would still be yours. However, you are doubtless content with your choice. I wish you joy of the faithful Captain Bennett."

The blood rushed to Hester's face at this attack, but so unexpected were his words that she found none with which to answer, and before she could recover her self-possession he was gone. This

insult seemed to her the culmination of her wretchedness, and had she not received a friendly bow from Colonel Ethan Allen a few minutes later, she would have been in tears before reaching Arlington. That one friendly glance rekindled her hope, and caused her to banish the thought of Neil's courtesy.

Less than three weeks from that memorable first of June Stephen Fay rode up to Miss Jane's door, demanding that Hester be allowed to return with him. Miss Jane met the request at first with a sharp negative, but Stephen Fay, after endless trouble and waste of speech, brought her over to his opinion, and she departed with much dignity to call her niece. When Hester appeared, ready dressed for the ride, Captain Fay hurried her into the saddle, lest the zealot of industry should change her mind; and it was not until they were on the high-road out of reach of Miss Jane's voice that he explained his errand.

"I have spoken further with Colonel Allen, dear child," he said, "and he is of my way of thinking. He says that in view of your bravery, the farm should have been re-deeded in your name, instead of being confiscated as your father's. He remembered you well, and said he should like to talk with you of this matter. Until to-day, however, he has been riding hither and thither, to Sunderland, Windsor, and elsewhere, not staying with

us three hours at a time. But now he is to be in Bennington for three days. Hester, I believe that he will accomplish what none of us could do."

Meanwhile Colonel Ethan Allen sat in the Council-room of the Tavern relating an experience of his captivity. He was seated in a great oak chair, drawn up beside a table on which stood a pewter mug of cider, for the day was warm and the Captain's cider justly famous. He had laid aside his well-worn suit of broadcloth for one of dark homespun, but his beaver hat, richly laced with gold, another token of the generosity of his friends in Ireland, rested beside him on the chair-arm. Around him were gathered a number of his comrades, some reclining in chairs, some standing against the table; one and all leaning toward him in attitudes of intense interest. Ira Allen, Colonel Seth Warner, Dr. Fay, and Isaac Tichenor were there, and as many more.

"If ever there are demons incarnate on this earth, Cunningham and Loring deserve the name!" cried Ethan Allen in a tone of thunder. "I tell you they thrust men down into those holes they are pleased to term prisons, to be killed by inches, to die of starvation and disease, aye, to die of the want of God's air and sunshine, while they, fiend-like, laugh at their sufferings! The eternal torments, which the parson promises so abundant, are a thousand times too good for such as they!"

Rising in his intensity, he struck his clenched hand against the table.

“I’ll drink with a will to their lasting destruction!” thundered he, catching up his pewter mug, while every man followed his example. “May the curses they so justly merit cling forever to their name!”

He drank freely, then slammed the pewter tankard down upon the table with tremendous force, keeping his left hand uplifted as if indeed invoking a malediction.

When, as now, he was roused to anger, his fiery spirit seemed to kindle into flame. With his dark eyes blazing, his wide brow knit, his white teeth locked, and showing between the lines of his strong stern mouth, he shouted forth his execrations in a voice that shook the roof.

The conversation turned to the Tories in the midst of them, and Isaac Tichenor spoke of Ezra Robinson and his escape from justice. The fire again leaped up in Ethan Allen’s soul.

“He deserved hanging!” shouted he with emphasis. “Aye, hanging, thrice cursed——”

“Hush, Colonel,” protested Ira, who had noticed what the others had not seen, “speak lower; Miss Robinson may hear you!”

At this moment the other inmates of the room became conscious that the door had opened, and that upon the threshold stood the traitor’s daugh-

ter. Ethan Allen, rising instantly, bowed to her with courtesy and grace, his manner changing in a flash.

"I humbly beg your pardon, Miss Robinson," he said politely, "for not sooner observing your presence."

Hester, with deepening colour, made a curtsey, then advanced a few steps rather hesitatingly till her hand met the firm grasp of Ethan Allen. Stephen Fay, who had entered with her, said smilingly:

"You probably remember this young lady, Colonel Allen, as the little maid whom you used to see flitting in and out of the Tavern. Yet I think you had not forgotten her."

"Forgotten her!" echoed Allen, looking down into the lovely face upturned to his. "Upon my word, I had not. But when I saw you last, Miss Robinson, you were little more than a child; while now," he regarded her with kindly admiration, "you might grace the King's court."

A flash of her old merriment shone in Hester's eyes. "I should prefer to grace the court of the Green Mountains, Colonel," she answered shyly.

"Upon my soul, well said, and so you shall. Faith, I'd no notion of giving you leave to turn Tory." Then, seeing dangerous ground, he added quickly, "I would that all the changes the past three years had brought me had been even as this."

He ended suddenly. There were tears in his bold dark eyes and Hester knew that he spoke of the son and the brother whom death had called away.

Colonel Allen seated Hester in the great chair, and himself sat down on the opposite side of the table. Stephen Fay, who thought it best that Hester should talk with him alone, had gone out with the rest. For a brief space Ethan Allen remained silent, looking thoughtfully at the troubled young face before him. Then, in his own frank, kindly fashion, he began to question her concerning various matters; her knowledge of her father's act, the value of his land and property, especially of her own services to the State in carrying the news to Stark. The young Secretary had by no means left him uninformed of the case, but Colonel Allen seemed intent on learning the facts from the girl's own lips. She answered him in a low voice, her clear eyes raised to his. Only her changing colour and the swift clasping and unclasping of her hands betrayed her agitation. When he had heard her through he sat and mused a while:

"Miss Robinson," he exclaimed at length, "they have deeply wronged you in this! Know they not true worth and courage when they see it? I'll vow they need some teaching!"

"I beg you to consider, Colonel Allen," urged Hester softly, "that in riding that night to

General Stark I did but do my duty. There is naught in that for which I merit reward."

"I'll not be made a convert to your way of thinking, that I warn you. I'll hold to my own opinion." Rising, he took Hester's pretty hand between his own strong fingers, smiling down at her with fatherly approval. "Hester," he said,— "you must let me call you Hester, for to me you are still a child—I give you the word of Ethan Allen that I will not rest till I see justice done you. It shall never be said that Ethan Allen left a wrong unrighted!"

With these cheering words in her mind Hester returned to Miss Jane, and took up her burden of life again. But although one weight of anxiety had been lightened, there seemed no escaping the others. As the summer stole on, Hester's wonder at Nathan Bennett's silence began to change to a feeling far more alarming. Hitherto she had persuaded herself that his letters had been intercepted by the enemy. Now, all suddenly, she became overwhelmed with fears. Suppose that he were dead! He might have died months ago, in the days when her hope was strongest! One thought flashed up to comfort her for a moment. If aught had befallen him, surely Cochise would know of it, and have brought her word. The flickering hope went out. They might both be dead, lying in nameless graves on some distant

battle-ground. The idea was maddening, and although she fought it incessantly, it was mastering her. Utter loneliness and brooding over fears were leading even her buoyant spirit down the long pathway to despair. As to Mark Ellis, another fancy troubled her. In her excited imaginings she endowed him with almost superhuman power, and attributed to him all her woes. He had led her father down to ruin; he had quenched the happiness of Polly's life; he had brought unbounded misery to herself. Would there yet be some day in the dim future when she must drink to the dregs the last drops of his hatred?

She had seen Colonel Allen but once since that day in the Tavern. He had overtaken her near Arlington one afternoon and had ridden beside her for some distance, conversing in his witty, piquant manner. He told her that the regular session of the legislature would not be held till October, but that a special meeting in September might reconsider her case. And he concluded with the facetious remark that "if they be not of my judgment they shall each be chastised with a goodly rod of the 'Beech-Seal' which aforetime had such moving influence on the Yorkers."

To Hester the friendship of Ethan Allen seemed the one star in her dark sky. But whenever she sang his praises to Miss Jane, that excellent female would reply that "Colonel Allen is

doubtless brave, and possesseth the virtues of a soldier, but his faults are many and grievous." And forthwith she would go on to tell of the rebellious arguments he held with Parson Dewey and indeed all the clergy of the neighbourhood, on the subject of religion.

"Did you never hear, child, of how once when rebellious arguments he held with Parson Dewey, preached a sermon on the character of God, and in the midst spoke something displeasing to the Colonel? And that bold man rose up—he had a pew well forward in the middle aisle—I was there and saw it all—rose up and said, so loud that all could hear it—'It's not so!'—and forthwith walked out of the pew! I could but hold my breath, child, for Colonel Allen is stubborn as the hills, and the Parson not to be trifled with. But the Rev. Jedediah, fearless in the cause of right, stretched out his arm, and pointed at the wicked heretic, saying sternly, 'Sit down, thou bold blasphemer, and listen to the word of God!' His righteous wrath was wonderful to behold! And Colonel Allen, child, sat down most respectful, and spoke not another word! But it sheweth, Hester, how he doth evilly oppose the churchly power."

Hester little dreamed that the dull monotony of her sojourn with Miss Jane marked the end of a distinct period in her life; yet she was on the

threshold of a change that would colour far differently the thread of her existence.

On a quiet Sunday evening in September she was sitting on the doorstep of her aunt's house, looking with thoughtful eyes at the crimson sky. She was alone, for Miss Jane, always a devout church-goer, was not content with attending the two lengthy services then customary, but had ridden to Sunderland to a prayer-meeting; while the prim serving-maid Belinda had gone to visit a mysterious relative of whom Hester had often heard but never seen. It was very peaceful in the quiet garden, and Hester took comfort in the solitude. Soon, however, she rose, mindful of duties to perform, and taking a bucket, went slowly down to the great well-sweep at the foot of the orchard. There she rolled back her sleeves, and filled the pail, resting her arms on the well-curb a moment and gazing down the long lane of trees. In a minute or so she straightened up, and went swiftly along the uneven path, leaning a little to one side with the weight of the bucket; her white arm tense with the strain. Halfway up the path she paused abruptly, and set down the pail so suddenly that the water spilled. She could see no one, yet surely someone had called her name. Her heart beat violently. Again she looked, and saw, in the partial twilight, a figure coming toward her that halted even as she beheld it. Cochise! For a

space the two gazed at each other as if both were spirits returned from another world. Then slowly, like one moving in a dream, she drew toward him, hardly certain as yet that it was really he, and not a vision wrought of fancy.

"Mam'selle Hestér," he said softly, "I feared to startle you, and so I spoke."

The sound of his voice broke the spell. She came forward, holding out both hands, and crying:

"Oh, it is really you, Cochise, come at last!" She was all a-tremble with mingling hope and fear. "Tell me there are no bad tidings, Cochise!"

"No, no, mam'selle, all is well, as the good God wills it."

"And Captain Bennett——?"

"He is safe, mam'selle, but he had fear that his letters came not."

"He wrote then!" cried Hester. "Strange that they never reached me. But it matters not now that I know——"

She broke off abruptly. Her face was radiant with smiles, but the tears were near.

"Mam'selle," said the Indian, "here are two letters," taking them from under his deerskin jacket as he spoke. "One from le capitaine Bennett, the other from M'sieu' Robinson."

She took them from his hand, thrusting that of Nathan Bennett beneath her kerchief, to be read when she was alone. Then, sitting down upon the

doorstep, she broke the seal of her father's letter. At the sight of the familiar writing the colour ebbed out of her face, and the paper shook between her fingers.

The letter bore the date of July 10th, showing how long it had awaited a messenger. It began by saying that hitherto there had been no opportunity to write, and that even as it was, it might be months before this could reach her. "I have a position of wealth and honour under Clinton," so it ran, "and my greatest wish is for you all to join me. If you can but get safe escort to White Plains, I shall be able to meet you there, and conduct you to a comfortable home in the city. It is not only practicable, but the only way in which I am capable of aiding you. It is only a matter of time when the war will end, for the Colonies are losing ground every day; and when we have crushed the rebels, those who voted against you shall swing for it. Ira Allen may be rewarded by a grant of land, as the entire country will be forfeited to the crown."

After exhausting this fertile subject the writer concluded with the repeated desire that they should leave as soon as possible for New York.

When she had read the letter twice, she sat for a time looking down at it, her head resting on her hand. A voice had cried to her from the happy life that had once been hers, before her father's

deed had brought abiding sorrow. Of the proposed journey to New York she hardly thought. The plan did not seem even possible. New York was only a name to her; a dream-city lying on the dim frontier. Even her father was more the well-loved image of her heart than the living man whose sin had caused her suffering. With the letter in her lap she sat and brooded while Cochise, silent and motionless, watched her with a sad and reverent gaze.

To Hester's intense surprise, Mrs. Robinson, when the news was told her, became instantly in favour of the journey to New York. Naturally she desired nothing more greatly than a home of her own. She painted in rich colours the life of a gay city, though the girl shuddered at the thought of making merry while patriot prisoners died by hundreds in loathsome prisons. Hester, in turn, dwelt on the hardships and dangers of the journey, and the fact that by going they would probably forfeit their last hope of regaining the farm. Mrs. Robinson answered that when this chance was offered them they ought not to remain a burden on their relatives. Yet it was almost certain that Hester's clear discernment would have won the day if Mrs. Robinson, despairing of her cause, had not played her last card, and told the girl of Ezra Robinson's dealings with Stephen Fay. After the first moment of shocked amazement,

Hester found her views completely altered, so much had her sense of honour been outraged by the tale. Indeed, it seemed to her that she could not bear to remain in Bennington with this added shame upon her conscience. So it was decided that they should start for New York as soon as preparations could be made.

Stephen Fay was strongly opposed to the project, for he saw the dangers too vividly to repress anxiety. The journey must be made on horseback through a country almost wilderness, and beside the certain hardships of the route, there was always the chance of encountering hostile bands below Albany. Miss Jane too heard the decision with indignation passing all bounds, and expressed her disapproval in no mild form, fortifying it with predictions of dire calamity. But neither Miss Jane's prophecies of disaster nor Stephen Fay's anxious face could move the girl from her purpose. Hester was a true Puritan; once convinced of her duty, she would perform it.

Cochise was to accompany the party as guide, but as further protection, it was thought best for them to await the departure of some of the scouts who were continually coming and going between Albany and "the Grants." Investigation revealed that four of these Rangers were to leave that very week, and the three determined to go with them.

So it happened that on Friday morning, the

18th of September, quite a group had gathered at the Catamount Tavern to see the travellers start. The weather-cock, public opinion, had swung round decidedly since Colonel Allen's interest in Hester had become known, and forthwith a number of their old-time friends were there to bid them farewell. Colonel Allen himself was in Connecticut, much to Hester's regret.

By nine o'clock all was ready for the journey, and the scouts, slinging on their muskets, led out the saddled horses. At the last moment Hester drew Stephen Fay aside and said in a trembling voice:

“Uncle Stephen, I have learned how father borrowed money of you, and did not pay it back. And you have been so noble to us all, so generous, so forgiving!” She faltered, but went on hurriedly, “Oh, believe me, if ever the farm is restored, I will not rest until that debt is paid!”

She caught his hand and kissed it, then turned and fled out to where the horses were waiting.

At sight of Hester, fair and dainty in her dark-grey riding habit and her riding-hat with its jaunty plume, Ira Allen came forward and assisted her to mount, standing a moment by her horse's side.

“Never fear, Miss Robinson,” he cried gaily, “that the Colonel and I will not settle your affair

to our liking. When once the Council know they have driven so brave a fair patriot to New York for protection the farm will be yours in a twinkling. But do not tarry too long among the Yorkers!"

The scouts were now impatient to set off, and there was only time for Stephen Fay to whisper to her:

" May God's blessing go with you, Hester! I shall have a heart at ease when I hear of your safety. And for my sake, do not let the burden of a deed long past so much as touch your life!"

So the last good-byes were said, and Hester gave her horse the whip and galloped away to join the others. But she waved to Stephen Fay as long as he was in sight, and at the top of the hill she halted for a last look at the lofty catamount that marked so loved a spot. Then they turned their horses into the westward road and took their leave of old Bennington. Hester's heart was heavy enough. She smiled and sang because, perforce, she must, but she knew well that her spirit would ever be linked in undying love to the fair hill-town that lay behind them.

After the first thirty miles the party divided, the scouts striking off toward Albany, while the rest, continuing their course southward, were fortunate enough to overtake another company of travellers, bound like themselves for New York. Their new

acquaintances were Tories from the northern part of the State, seeking protection under Clinton.

The second week of their journey was not pleasant. The autumn rains had set in, making the roads almost impassable. Then, too, they dared not take the most frequented route, but instead kept close to the eastern border of the State, for the Hudson valley was full of marauders. When their horses sank almost to the knee in mud at every step, and a chill rain poured from a leaden sky, it was little wonder that hope deserted them. Yet it seemed to Hester that more than the weather was responsible for the utter depression which settled over her. It was no certainty of which she stood in dread, but a vague fear of that which lay before them, all the more terrifying because of its vagueness.

On the very day that the little party entered the County of Westchester, better known in those times as the ill-famed "Neutral Ground," two men sat talking together in General Clinton's headquarters in New York City.

"I think you are right," said Clinton, "the loyalists here seem sadly disheartened by the turn affairs have taken; it is time we have some festivity to cheer them."

Mark Ellis laughed, and leaned back lazily in his chair.

"And what better festivity than a ball, your

Excellency? What with lovely ladies, beauteous gowns, and inspiring music, the dullest coward of them all must come to life again!"

Clinton smiled, and drawing his chair to the polished table, caught up a quill and dashed off a few hurried lines.

"There, Captain," said he, pushing the paper toward Ellis, as several young officers entered, "the thing's done. There is an order for the finest ball that was ever danced in New York. Now, gentlemen," turning to the others, "prepare to seek out the fairest maids in the town to adorn the evening of October 9th. I doubt not you will find them."

"And who will be your lady, Ellis?" said a tall young captain, dark and handsome, watching the other with mischievous eyes.

Ellis, rising, straightened his graceful figure and shot a haughty glance at his questioner.

"I'll have the fairest maid in the land, or none," cried he with gay defiance. "I know the maid that could outshine them all in beauty!"

"Who is she, Ellis?" cried they in chorus.

"Why, gentlemen, 'tis a secret," said he with mock solemnity, "and yet on consideration I will tell you,"—he paused—"on the night of the ball," he ended gravely, amid angry protestations from his hearers.

"She's not of New York, that I'll say," con-

tinued Ellis, taking up his cocked hat. "Here, lads," he cried with the motion of lifting a wine-glass, "I'll wager you, ten to one, that I have for partner at the ball the fairest maid that ever buckled shoe. If she's denied me I'll not dance a measure!"

"Agreed," cried they with laughter, while Ellis flung on his cloak and departed, singing with gay mockery the melody of a love-song.

CHAPTER XX

THE RIFT IN THE PINES

IT was at noon on the first day of October that the little company of travellers caught their first glimpse of the beautiful Hudson Valley. They reined in their horses on the summit of a lofty hill while Cochise pointed out to Hester the silver curve of the river ten miles to the westward and the dark embankment of the hills beyond it. It was a sunny autumn day. The beauty of the land, together with the knowledge that their journey's end was but twenty miles away, made Hester conscious of reviving hope.

Yet the land for all its loveliness was scarred by hostile armies. The fields lay unharvested; the fences and walls were broken, half the houses they passed were deserted; many of them in ashes. Moreover, some of the signs of destruction were too recent to be ignored. When they suddenly came upon some smoking ruins that had been but an hour before a comfortable homestead they knew that the marauders must be close at hand. They did not let these warnings go unheeded. Without loss of time they put their horses at full

speed, and before the afternoon was well begun they were within the shelter of the forest that lay in dense miles along the eastern border of the State. Their intention was to follow the Massachusetts line, skirting the edge of the Neutral Ground till they were opposite White Plains, and then making a bold dash across the few miles between them and their goal.

About two hours after noon they halted for rest and food in a little glade shut in by sombre pines. After the meal it was decided, since all were weary with hard riding, that they should camp there and go no further that day. The horses were unsaddled, the Tory refugees kindled a fire and threw themselves down to catch what sleep they could, while Cochise, whose keen eyes had been attracted by some mysterious trail, refilled his powder-horn and plunged off to investigate. So quiet and secluded was their place of refuge that no one thought of danger.

Hester stole away from the little clearing, roaming on, lost in dreaming, pausing now and then to pluck a late spray of feathery aster, till at last she reached a quiet nook, a fairy grotto fringed with lady birches and curtained with scarlet maples. It was too tempting a spot to be passed, and Hester, curling herself up in the moss, drew from its hiding-place the letter Nathan Bennett had sent by Cochise. This was the last touch

needed to transport her to another world, that mystic world of dreams which is set like a bubble inside a bubble within our own. Time and place vanished. The dream was substance, the present, unreality.

How long her reverie lasted she could not tell. A confusion of sounds shook her rudely from it. She sprang up dazed and trembling. The sounds became more audible; loud commands, trampling hoofs and frightened voices came to her in a confused uproar. She began to run in the direction of the tumult, but soon paused, wholly bewildered. She was as completely lost as if she had been miles from the camp. Then, too, the sound appeared to move, coming now from one side, now from another. By this time, although alarmed, she had regained her self-control, and she forced herself to stand still, while she observed the position of the sun, and examined the moss on the trees as Cochise had taught her. At length, certain of the direction, she hastened to retrace her steps, astonished to find how far she had wandered. All was again quiet and she began to think that her fancy had magnified the sounds, and that after all there was no cause for alarm.

When at last she pushed aside the network of branches and entered the clearing, of all those she had left not one remained. The fire of pine-cones was still burning and there were marks of hoofs

upon the trampled ground, but except for these tokens the place was utterly deserted. Whither had they vanished? Had a hostile band swooped out of the treacherous forest and borne them away as prisoners? Terror seized her. She ran along the edge of the wood, calling to her mother and Polly in frightened tones that echoed loudly through the mocking silence.

It seemed hours to her terrified fancy that she stood there, calling and listening, but in reality but a few minutes passed before she heard a light step close at hand and turned to see Cochise at her side. He had been nearly a mile away when the sound of commotion reached him, and though as ignorant of its cause as she, his Indian instinct had already led him to surmise the truth. He now moved rapidly across the clearing, stooping here and there to examine the hoof-prints in the wet clay. From these he quickly gathered that a party of horsemen had appeared, and as Hester's quickened fancy had already told her, carried the others away with them. He followed the marks across the clearing into the underbrush, and down to the brink of a little stream, where they ended abruptly. He continued his quest along both banks; Hester, her sweet face ashen-pale, searching also. But though they pursued the hoof-prints for a mile, they gained nothing beyond the confirmation of their fears.

As the consciousness of it all came upon her, she clasped her hands in sheer despair, crying brokenly:

“Great Heavens! what is to become of us? Must we die here in this wilderness?”

She was so white and helpless that Cochise, full of pity, tried to reassure her:

“Oh, no, mam’selle, it cannot be so bad as that! The good God will protect us!” And agitated as she was, his unwavering faith rebuked her.

It was now almost sunset, and Cochise, seeing at a glance that Hester was too exhausted to go further, built a fire on the bank of the little brook and prepared what meal he could from his scanty store. But the girl would not eat, and crouched in pitiful silence by the fire, her face white and set in despair. Her vivid fancy already pictured her mother and cousin as dead, or doomed to horrible captivity. Cochise at last began to tell a curious story of the French War, hoping thus to divert her mind from its brooding. He had inherited from his mother a gentleness of bearing that, joined to the peculiar softness of his voice, made his manner of speaking strangely attractive, and this effect was aided by his natural eloquence. Hester could not but feel an interest in the story, and little by little hope grew within her mind. When the tale was ended exhaustion came to her relief, and, wrapped in her cloak, she lay down to sleep in the glow of the little fire. Cochise took up his loaded

musket and began to pace in ceaseless vigil up and down the bank. For a time she watched his tall, straight figure, then woods and firelight blended slowly as she sank into the sleep of utter weariness.

The morning sunlight, sifting through the branches, touched her to wakefulness. She sprang up bewildered, calling her cousin's name, just as Cochise appeared within the clearing. He was almost certain now that her mother and Polly had been captured by a band of patriot scouts in search of the recreant Tories, and that the prisoners would be taken to Albany. Their best plan, he thought, would be to strike westward, despite the fear of raiders, and reach the Albany coach-road. Hester agreed at once to this project. Near as she was to New York, she could not have endured meeting her father without her mother and Polly. Moreover, the many dangers between them and White Plains put that plan out of question.

So they set off upon their journey. The first day passed without incident, and Hester, who had wearied of the saddle, found the way less tiresome than she had supposed. But by the end of the second day her feet became so tired that she was very glad to exchange her dainty buckled shoes for a pair of little moccasins that Cochise gave her. They were now out of the Neutral Ground, and Hester began to hope that the danger lay behind

them. But Cochise was not deceived, though he carefully hid his misgivings from Hester.

Since the beginning of their northward journey the weather had changed greatly. The summer warmth was gone, and instead the air was keen and piercing, with a chill that mocked the vivid autumn sunshine.

Cochise and Hester travelled on; the one conscious of coming dangers all unknown to the other. But before many hours passed, even Cochise could not hide their peril. One night, nearly a week after the separation of the party, Hester insisted on assuming the young Indian's place as sentinel, and though Cochise begged her to take some needed rest, she remained firm, till he, seeing how he might use this chance to advantage, at length yielded to her wishes. It was about ten o'clock of a frosty October night, dimly lighted by the waning hunter's moon. Hester took the musket and began to pace the narrow pathway cast by the moonlight, while Cochise stole noiselessly away into the surrounding shadows. For fully half-an-hour the girl continued to walk to and fro, till at last her weariness conquered, and sitting down upon a rock, she let the musket rest upon her knee, while she struggled hard to keep her eyes from closing. She was soon roused, however, by a low voice speaking her name, and she rose up, startled, beholding Cochise close beside her.

"Mam'selle Hestér, be not frightened. There is that I must tell you. They follow us."

"Who follow us?" she cried, astonished.

"Mam'selle, it is—*le capitaine Ellis and his band.*"

She turned very white and her breath came sharply. This, then, had been the meaning of her fears.

"Are you sure?" she cried in a tense whisper, "Mark Ellis, the spy?"

"I went to their camp to-night; it lies two miles yonder. So long as there was chance I feared to tell you."

"But there must be a chance of escape yet. Oh, let us start at once. We can surely elude them somehow!"

Cochise extinguished the camp-fire and they went silently down to the little stream not far distant. He lifted Hester in his arms and carried her across, and once on the opposite side they resumed their journey at the swiftest pace they could follow. Dawn found them many miles from their evening's camping-place, yet their pursuers gained upon them steadily. Cochise knew the hopelessness of attempting to escape from horsemen. Although by skill they might elude their foes for a time, the end was certain.

Hour after hour they pushed on, concealing their trial as best they could, winding hither and thither

to hinder pursuit. They dared not stop to eat, and to Hester, faint and weary, every step seemed the last she could possibly take. It was a desperate, headlong flight from an inevitable foe. About three hours past noon the refugees reached a spacious opening in the woods, marked by a lofty pine. With a long, sobbing breath, Hester, utterly exhausted, sank down at the foot of the tree, gazing about her with despairing eyes. The young Indian looked down at her in mute pity.

"I cannot go another step, Cochise," she cried in a trembling whisper. "Do not linger here to share my fate. Captain Ellis bears you so great a hate, I shudder to think what he might do."

Even as she spoke she caught a glimpse of colour among the trees. The end had come! She arose to her feet, and swept her outstretched arm towards the approaching horsemen.

"Cochise, go! There is yet time! You cannot aid me by staying here!"

Her arm fell, and she stretched out her clasped hands to him, crying:

"For *my* sake, Cochise, go! Oh, be merciful and obey me!"

The young Indian stood motionless.

"Mam'selle," he said, "am I so base that I would leave you? Do not speak again, mam'selle, I implore you."

Hester leaned back faint and trembling against

the tree. For an instant her eyes closed in sheer terror; then they opened and she took a step forward and stood there, straight and proud, and resolute as a princess; a great calm upon her still white face. Her gown had been torn and stained by their mad flight, her brown hair fell in a tangled braid across her shoulders, her eyes had the wide hopeless gaze of haunting fear. But no queen could have faced her foes with a mien more dauntless.

The horsemen, fifty or more, advanced rapidly, quite filling the little glade. Mark Ellis, who rode foremost, dismounted and bowed to Hester, delight and triumph in his eyes.

“Well met, fair maid! Truly, Fate deals us unlooked for pleasures!”

“Captain Ellis, as you are a generous and honourable gentleman, I ask you to go your way, and leave me to go mine.”

“Ah, but the law of the Yorkers, like that of the Grants, is the law of the strongest. And by that law you are my prisoner.”

For an instant his eyes left her to sweep the Indian with a glance of vindictive scorn, which Cochise answered with a gaze as calm and passionless as if their positions had been reversed.

“I pray you, Captain Ellis, though you hold *me* prisoner, that you let this man go free!” she cried.

Ellis laughed cruelly and remarked:

“What we have, we’ll hold! Here, men, seize this fellow and take him yonder. And if he escape, you shall dangle for it!”

Half a dozen men flung themselves upon Cochise, expecting a furious struggle, but the young Indian made no attempt to defend himself, and passively submitted to be bound. Throughout this scene Hester stood silent and motionless, her gaze never varying. His captors dragged the Indian to the rear of the column, while Ellis, with a taunting smile, turned again to Hester. By this time the entire band, used as they were to their leader’s caprices, were staring curiously at the two principal actors of the little drama. Ellis, in common with his companions, wore a uniform of faded scarlet faced with buff, which, with his riding-boots, cocked hat, and gleaming sword, made him appear half soldier, half adventurer. He had changed but little in the past year, save for a certain hardening of his handsome mouth.

“Will it please you to mount, fair rebel?” said he, taking Hester’s hand.

Seeing further resistance to be in vain, the girl complied, and was soon mounted upon Ellis’s horse, while he, springing up behind her, gave the order to start. The entire party, wheeling their horses southward, took their way at a reckless gallop along the same road by which they had come. For

twenty miles and more they held to their headlong pace, not once drawing rein to ease their panting horses. But by sundown it became evident that they had reached their own domain, for they made no further attempt at haste, but pulled their tired steeds to a walk, and rode through the twilight, laughing, shouting, and singing wild snatches of boisterous songs. Ellis dismounted and walked at Hester's side, one arm flung over the horse's neck, talking and jesting with pitiless gaiety, while she stared straight ahead and answered not.

For the past few miles their road had followed the river. Soon, however, their path climbed upward, leaving the Hudson far below, while in their front rose the steep, pine-cleft hills that towered above the river's eastern bank. Suddenly in the crest above them showed a slender rift in the dark wall of pines. They mounted the slope and passed through the narrow opening.

The building that loomed before them out of the gathering dusk was massive and stately. The lofty portico was adorned by white pillars; the gabled roof seemed to frown upon the intruder. Passing around to the rear, the entire band dismounted, and as they began to unsaddle their horses and post their sentries it was made plain that this was their refuge for the night. The deserted house was built Roman-fashion about a stone-paved court, whose empty niches had once held marble figures,

and in whose shattered vases brilliant flowers once bloomed.

Leaving half of the party to light a fire in the courtyard, Ellis and the rest led their prisoners into the hall. This was a great, dim, high-roofed room, over whose blackened rafters and heavy furniture the torch-light flickered with weird effect. A massive staircase ascended from one corner and an immense fireplace filled the opposite side.

Ellis gave the place a rapid scrutiny and then cried sternly:

“Here you, take the Indian below, and mind he does not slip you, Allan; and escort our pretty visitor upstairs.”

Allan Kinsdale, with a princely bow, offered his fair prisoner his arm, and drew her with him up the great staircase. Pausing in the upper hall, he produced a key and fitted it into the crumbling keyhole. The lock yielded unwillingly, and meantime the girl stood shivering, for the hall was as cold as a cellar and a damp wind blew down the stairway. The door being opened, he waved to her to enter, and as she did so he entered after her, lit a candle on the table from his torch, brought some wood from a corner, and hastily kindled a fire, then went out, carefully locking the door behind him.

Hester, left to herself, gazed with curious eyes about her prison. The room was so large and

gloomy that the feeble candle made but little impress on the darkness. There was just light enough to get a shadowy glimpse of the place. At the windows hung silken fragments of what had once been curtains, and the floor was partly covered with the remains of a splendid carpet. Wall and ceiling were panelled in oak, now black with the marks of rain and weather. The tiles of the fireplace were defaced and broken and the hearth was grey with the ashes of fires long dead. A carved, mahogany table was propped up by a stone, a handsome high-backed chair was tottering on its partly broken legs. The great bed had been stripped of its fragrant linen and embroidered counterpane, while its hangings of crimson damask were torn and moth-eaten.

When Allan Kinsdale returned to his prisoner he found her crouching in a pitiful heap beside the cold hearth. The fire had gone out, and the air had the penetrating chill of a room long unwarmed. As he entered she raised her head, and, despite her wretchedness flashed him a defiant glance. For a moment he stood in silence by the door regarding her with deep sympathy. Then advancing toward her, he said gently:

“Why, you are chilled through! Now this treatment agrees not with any chivalry!”

He caught off his cloak and went over to her. She shrank from his touch, but he stooped and

gently wrapped it around her. She thanked him in a low voice that shook a little—perhaps with cold.

“Will you not come down to the hall-fire, madam? I can assure you safety, for Captain Ellis is gone for perhaps an hour. This chimney will not burn, it has been cold so long.”

“I thank you for your kindness, sir,” she faltered. “But I cannot come. This room would seem all the colder when I returned.” She hesitated, but presently asked, “What is to be done with Cochise?”

“You mean the Indian? That I know not, madam.”

“Oh, be merciful,” she cried, rising and holding out clasped hands. “Do not let them torture or maltreat him. Had it not been for my sake, he would be free to-night.”

“I will do what I can, madam, but I have no power. Ellis is tyrant here.”

She shuddered, but did not answer; and Allan presently withdrew.

Hester, cold and trembling, climbed on the great bed and drew the tattered blankets around her. She had no way of measuring the hours, save by her excited fancy, and she crouched there, staring at the shadowy spaces of ceiling and corner. The guttering candle cast goblin shapes on the walls, and at every sound of violent song and laughter

that mounted from below she shuddered. But at last exhaustion conquered; and she sank into a tired heap, her head pillow'd upon her arm. The night with its murmuring wind and its ghostly hushes stole by unheeded, and again waned, and slowly yielded to another day—pale, cold and cheerless.

CHAPTER XXI

THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN

THE deserted mansion of Ellis's retreat, built in 1670, in the early days of English settlement in that territory, when the State had not long been reclaimed from the Netherlands, was far enough from West Point to be safe, and an easy two hours' ride from the British outposts at White Plains. But the greatest virtue of the place was the peculiar situation which had named it, "The Rift in the Pines," on account of the narrow opening of the trees in front, through which showed a glimpse of the gleaming river and the misty heights of the opposite shore. On the other three sides the forest hid it completely, so that by carefully closing up all the western windows and taking heed that no tell-tale smoke ever rose from its chimneys, the house presented to both road and river as dark and deserted an appearance as before.

As for Ellis and his band, they were, at best, a wild and reckless company, picked up at random from the Tories of the Neutral Ground; holding no man in reverence; knowing no law save the law of force. Many of them, like their leader, were

officers in the British army, who, finding the time heavy on their hands, took delight in midnight raids and mad adventures. They were known as "Ellis's Terrors." When this far-famed band bore down upon some lonely farmhouse its inmates had good cause for fear, and were fortunate indeed if food and horses were all the marauders wanted. Ellis's victims, too, were his unwilling allies, for none dared to resist the raiders, and "The Rift in the Pines" became as safe a lurking-place as if it had been fortified with cannon.

When Hester awoke after the long sleep that follows deep exhaustion, the light of a cloudy autumn morning was stealing in through the tattered window-curtains. Her first thought was that she had reached New York, and that her long, hard journey was at an end. But memory, with cruel clearness, worked a speedy disenchantment. She sprang from the bed and ran to the window opening on the courtyard. A fire had been kindled on the stone pavement and some men in faded red-and-buff were moving hither and thither, calling to each other in loud tones.

Presently a roughly clad soldier thrust a plate of food and a pitcher of water in at her door, which was banged to and locked, and she heard his heavy boots clattering down the stairs. The plate and pitcher were in accord with the faded splendour of the entire house, for the plate had

parted with at least a third of its former substance, and the pitcher wanted a handle. Hester, however, was too hungry to refrain from this food, coarse and ill-cooked though it was.

When she had finished eating, she began to pace restlessly up and down her prison, starting at every creak of the ancient boards under her light footsteps. The chamber had three large windows, but the two looking westward, which should have opened upon the pillared porch, had been closed by strong pine boards. For a time the girl stood looking at these fastenings of her prison house, then turned and came back to the fireless hearth.

Fully an hour had passed, when a swift, firm footstep ascended the stair and came along the hallway to the door. Again the clumsy lock creaked under the key, and a moment later Ellis himself stood within the room. Hester rose instantly from her seat beside the hearth, and blue eyes and grey met with a defiant flash. Then Ellis in his usual mocking tone, said carelessly:

“ How fares it with you, sweet maid? ”

She parried the inquiry with another question.

“ I wish to ask, sir, for what purpose you hold me prisoner? ”

“ Ah, you desire the truth as usual. But why repeat an oft-told tale? You know I love you! ”

“ You take a strange way of showing it, sir. A man does not torture the woman he truly loves! ”

"Faith, no," agreed Ellis, "if only she complies with his wishes. But with you, Mistress Wilful, one must choose another course. Force will do what pleading cannot."

With these words he advanced to where she stood by the hearth. She started to move away, but he suddenly put his arm around her, and drew her to his side. She struggled hard to free herself, but he held her fast.

"Coward!" she panted, "let me go this instant!"

"Not so fast, not so fast, pretty one!" said he coolly, a triumphant smile upon his face. "I care not to talk with the room's length between us. So here you stay till I finish my speech. Do you remember that night when we danced together, you and I, in that old tavern in a far-away town? Your gown was silver-blue with forget-me-nots,—forget-me-nots, fair maid of the hills. Well, tomorrow night Clinton holds revel in New York;—such a ball as was never seen before,—and you shall be my partner as in the days of old, my pretty Puritan, and outshine them all in beauty!"

"Be your partner? Go with you to New York?" cried Hester angrily. "What mockery are you talking? You know that I will not go!"

"Look you, sweet Hester, there was once a day when you spurned me, when you chose to say that even a half-breed Indian was worthier love than I.

They who speak thus to Mark Ellis, pay for it, and so shall you, in brimming measure. That is fair, I think. You had your day of triumph, and now comes mine. To-morrow morn you ride with me to the City. To-morrow eve you dance with me at the ball!"

He ended with an exultant smile, regarding the terror in her lovely face. As for Hester, she fought back despair with all her strength of soul, and answered proudly:

"Mark Ellis, you play a coward's part. I tell you for once and for all: you may keep me here a prisoner till I die; you may kill me, if you choose, but ride to New York I never will!"

Unfeigned admiration shone in Ellis's eyes; with a passionate impulse he stooped and kissed her hands.

"Hester, Hester, you alone are worthy of my love! Why do you shrink so from me, your lover? Are we not better mated than any other two?"

Transforming anger glowed in Hester's face. Wrenching herself from his grasp, she sprang some steps away from him.

"You but waste words, Mark Ellis!" Her sweet voice rang with scorn. "Seek for your partner what other maid you will; but know that Hester Robinson goes not with you one step!"

Ellis walked calmly to the door, then turned and said:

"You have matched your will against mine; well, so be it! Time will tell which proves the stronger. If you were a man we should have a pretty duel. Adieu, my fair challenger!"

But although she made a show of outward courage, Hester's heart failed her, and when her persecutor had taken his leave she sank in a wretched heap upon the broken chair, and hid her face in her hands. With brief flashes of hope and long intervals of despair, the day wore slowly by, and again twilight fell upon "The Rift in the Pines."

About an hour after nightfall Allan Kinsdale, engaged in thought, sat beside the fire in the lofty chamber which had once been used as dining-room. Save for the massive sideboard and the great, carved table there was small resemblance to its former dignity, for guns and pistols, boots and riding-cloaks, whips and saddles, were strewn hither and thither in absolute confusion. A few logs burned in the wide fireplace, struggling feebly against the chill of the October night; while the rain, leaking in through a gap in the roof, trickled slowly down the wall and lay in little puddles on the bare floor. There were broken wine-glasses on the sideboard, and a shattered mirror in a tarnished frame hung above it. The rich table was scarred and dented by the swords and spurs that had been flung upon it.

The door opened to admit Mark Ellis, and Allan

dismissed his thoughts to greet his companion. Ellis lit a pipe, threw himself into a chair, and began to smoke reflectively, the firelight playing over his handsome face. At length Allan, looking up, observed carelessly:

“ Well, Mark, what are you going to do with your prisoners? ”

“ If you are really desirous of knowing, Mistress Wayward goes with me to New York. As for the Indian,”—here Ellis’s teeth closed savagely,—“ I’ll either put him safely out of the way, or let Clinton dispose of him as a spy. Whichever method, he’ll do no further harm. But why are you so anxious in this matter? ”

“ Hang me, Ellis, I’ve a little natural curiosity! I can’t shut myself up like a snail, and neither hear nor see what goes on around me. You ought to be thankful I don’t challenge you for the sake of that pretty witch upstairs.”

“ Hold your insolent tongue! ” cried Ellis, who was not, for some reason, in a genial humour. “ Beware how you meddle in my affairs! The girl is my prisoner, to be dealt with as I choose. Therefore the less you concern yourself——”

“ Faith, my dear Ellis, when have I ever opposed you in any way? I promise not to take your sweetheart, though I confess I am sadly jealous that so fair a creature is for another.” Here he lowered his eyes and shot a searching glance at

Ellis from beneath dropped lids. "But seriously, Mark, why don't you let the maid go free? You gain nothing by holding her prisoner. She's not the kind to yield to either threats or pleading!"

"Keep your counsel till it's asked for, Allan! You're a pretty one to advise!"

Allan Kinsdale's brown eyes were fastened on the fire; and his brows drew themselves into a troubled frown. Memory, when he summoned her, was not kind to him. Life had buffeted him upon its waves like driftwood and blunted the finer edges of his manhood. Chivalry and refinement, which had been born in him, could not die. Ellis had recognised certain loyal qualities in the handsome spendthrift, and the two had formed a curious partnership of wild living; but the essential difference between them was that Allan retained through all his misdeeds a latent sense of right. Now as he gazed into the flames the young Englishman saw again the home he deserted, and the memory, bitter-sweet, stirred in him swift decision.

"You say your pretty prisoner comes from the Grants, Ellis? 'Tis the country that gave Burgoyne so hard a lashing a year ago. And more, 'tis the land of that dare-devil, Ethan Allen. Faith, Ellis, timely advice is a goodly thing. If this maid be as I think she is, you will grow old in conquering her. They're all alike, these rebels.

As Gage said, they draw in liberty with the air they breathe. Look at Ethan Allen! We English tortured and threatened, and all but killed him, but what of that! He didn't yield, not he! And this girl is of the same mould. You can kill, but you can't conquer them! They fight to the last, and die fighting. Save yourself trouble, and a little honour, Ellis, and give her freedom!"

Ellis sprang up, with set teeth, his hand on his sword-hilt.

"Your words are like to cost you more than they are worth!" he cried fiercely. "If ever you speak thus to me again, I'll thrust a sword through you!"

Allan looked at him without the least sign of anger.

"Now, Mark," said he, "you'd think better of it before the point touched me," and with a calm smile he rose and quietly departed, leaving Ellis to his reflections. In a few minutes, however, he reappeared, to observe carelessly:

"There's a moving light off the west shore; I thought best to mention it."

"Plague take you, why didn't you speak sooner!" cried Ellis, already on his feet and tightening his sword-belt. "Tell the men to saddle their horses. The rebels are up to some game, and I'll spy it out. Faith, I must leave a strong guard here, though. A dozen of us are enough to catch the prize!"

He threw on his cloak, and called to his receding comrade :

“ The devil take me, Allan, if I know what I’m to do ! ”

“ He’d meet his match if he did,” interjected Allan.

“ I can’t leave you here,” went on Ellis, without notice of his companion’s doubtful praise. “ You may carry off my fair maid of the hills, how can I tell? I might send you instead. Faith, no, that’s impossible; you’d waste half the night in a wild-goose chase, and come lingering back with nothing accomplished. I’ll go myself, and woe to you, if you fail in your trust ! ”

When Ellis and a dozen of his band had galloped into the darkness, and their disappointed comrades had returned to cards and flip in the courtyard, Allan lit a candle and went cautiously up the great stairway. The feeble light he bore flared fitfully in the strong draught, and he was forced to shelter the flame with his hand from being extinguished altogether.

When at last he undid the clumsy fastenings of the door and entered, Hester sprang up, trembling, to meet him. How greatly she had been wrought upon by her captivity was plainly visible in her wide imploring eyes and quivering fingers. Allan put the candle on the table, and watched her in pitying silence.

"Was it not Captain Ellis who rode away just now?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Yes, madam," he answered slowly, his eyes studying the floor "he goes upon a raid up-river. He may return, however, at any moment." He paused for an instant, then continued rapidly. "Believe me, I have tried to find some way of helping you, of setting you free from this place, but thus far, there has not been a single chance for your escape. Even now I dare not liberate you; the moment of Ellis's return is too uncertain. Besides there are men below-stairs who would prevent me; they so fear Ellis's vengeance that they watch the prisoner night and day. Madam, I know not how——"

She interrupted him by crying with sudden passion:

"Oh, if he should come to harm, I should feel that I had murdered him! There breathes not a man more noble! Would that Ellis were as he! Rather than Cochise should——" She faltered, then her voice grew steady. "Give me a horse! I can ride to West Point and back before dawn——"

He put his hand on hers, saying:

"No, no, it is impossible! Ellis would have you again before you had gone a mile. Hark! there are the horses now!" He caught up the candle, adding in a whisper, "If chance comes,

madam, I will help you, though it cost my life!"

Ellis returned triumphant. He had been gone less than an hour, but that time had sufficed to accomplish his purpose. The light had proved to be the lantern of an unwary sloop, which had been captured after a sharp skirmish. Ellis, highly elated, had no sooner dismounted than he assembled his fellow-officers in the great hall, and called for liquor with which to celebrate his triumph. Around the long table, crowded with candles and wine-glasses, were gathered at least twenty of the adventurers, eager for revel, and ready to expend their high spirits at wine or swords as the occasion offered. Toast after toast was drunk with exultant cheers, and excitement waxed higher and higher. Hester, kneeling upon the floor upstairs, caught the echoes of their riotous mirth, and shuddered to hear her own name shouted amid the storm of revelry.

But the carousal, at its very height, came suddenly to a startling end. There sat a few seats from Ellis a man with a reckless bearing and a wild, handsome face, upon whom wine and excitement worked speedy ruin. For when Ellis had toasted his fair prisoner for the third time, this man sprang unsteadily to his feet, crying out:

"He shan't carry off the prettiest maid I ever set eyes on, without so much as, 'By your leave.'

Shall he, lads? Look you, Ellis, she's no more your prisoner than she is mine! I'll fight you thrice over ere I'll see you do it! Take that for a challenge!"

With the words he seized a heavy silver tankard and flung it full at Ellis, who leaped aside nimbly, while the tankard struck the wall with a crash, staining the panelled oak a dark and ominous red with its contents. By this time the entire company were in a tumult; some cheering, some laughing, the more sober trying to push themselves between the new-made foes. Ellis, crying fiercely, "You shall die for this!" whipped out his sword, and in a voice choked with rage, ordered a space to be cleared. The wine he had taken had served only to heighten his fine colour and the brilliance of his eyes, and helped him to a certain calmness in the midst of his fury.

By now the men from the courtyard had crowded into the hall to learn the cause of the disturbance, and were grouped at the doors, impatient to behold a duel between two of the finest swordsmen in the company. All was ready for the combat when Ellis, swayed by some mad caprice, whispered a command to a half-drunk soldier, and when the man had gone upon his errand, exclaimed to the expectant audience:

"I' faith, lads, 'tis a pity for our guests to miss this pleasure, especially when one of them is the

cause of it. Therefore we wait their coming ere we open the entertainment."

Whereat with great coolness he fell to tracing figures with his sword-point.

Hester, stiff and cold, summoned by Ellis' rough messenger, followed him, dazed and trembling, down the stairway. On the landing she paused almost dazzled by the flood of light below after the darkness of her prison, yet comprehending at a glance the scene before her—Ellis and his rival, standing with bared swords, the impatient watchers, the dim recesses of the hall. As she stood there, hesitating, the soldier roughly caught her arm, and pulled her forward. She shrank back at finding herself almost in the midst of the company, while Ellis, springing to her side, dealt the man a heavy blow, and bending, seized her hand and kissed it with impassioned ardour. She blushed an angry scarlet over cheek and brow, and snatched her hand away from him; then retreated, confused and frightened, to a vacant spot by the fireplace not far from where Allan Kinsdale stood. Cochise, too, was brought in, closely guarded. Hester, turning, met his gaze, which sought her face in painful apprehension. She flashed him one pitying glance, then, regaining her composure, let her eyes steal timidly about the room. As they rested with a shudder on the hardened faces of the raiders, she saw all too truly that

to Allan alone could she appeal for any saving grace.

Ellis delayed no longer. Advancing to the middle of the cleared space, he sprang furiously at his enemy, who, taken by surprise, had barely time to save himself from instant death. Hester's gaze was held by fearful fascination on the scene; watching with quickened heart-beats every gleam of the darting steel, noting every motion of the combatants. It was plain enough that the rivals, in their present condition, were indeed ill-matched, for Ellis's perfect poise of mind and body, and his cool determined mastery of his art, boded evil to his reckless foe, who, inflamed with wine and rage, lost all caution and parried with unsteady strokes his opposer's blade. There seemed—on Ellis's part—something superhuman in the swiftness of his movements and the ceaseless vigilance with which he met his foeman's every attempt to overcome his guard. With cruel skill he brought the combat to its tragic end, though how that end came none could tell. There was a sudden, subtile leap of treacherous steel, and the swords crossed halfway to the hilt; Ellis's rival staggered back, one hand clinched at his breast. The on-lookers rushed forward, applauding the victor, who stood silent and contemptuous, with lowered blade.

Hester's eyes were dilated with horror; the

room grew dim, and she put out one hand to steady herself. Allan Kinsdale, seeing her eyelids close and her head droop forward, came quickly to her side, but in a flash she straightened, and shook off the faintness. The woman conquered and she took a step toward the wounded man, conscious only that he needed help. Allan gently drew her back: "No, no, madam, there is naught you can do," he whispered, "he is beyond all aid." Her eyes searched Ellis' face, and her last hope died. In that moment she knew how worse than useless it would be to appeal to either his mercy or his honour. He sheathed his sword with an impatient gesture and waved to the men at his back.

"Here, you, the fun is over! Take him out, and clear the room of all but the prisoners!"

He beckoned Allan to go with the rest, muttering something to him in French, unintelligible to Hester, which Cochise caught instantly and knew to be ominous of danger. As the men pressed between her and Ellis, Hester drew near the young Indian; so near that she could have touched his bound arms, crying in a low whisper:

"Oh, Cochise, Cochise, is no hope left us? When you have suffered so much for my sake, must you die by that man's hand? Oh, forgive me, if you can, for bringing you to this! There is nothing but death for us both!"

A great light shone in the Indian's eyes.

“Mam’selle,” he cried, “mam’selle, to die would be most welcome so it saved *you*, but to leave you thus——”

He broke off suddenly, and turned to face his foe, for the room was cleared, and Ellis came toward them, laughing.

“Well, now, here’s to end the business. I’ve a question for you, ‘monsieur’! and now’s the time to ask it.”

Cochise was standing on the very edge of the shadow cast by the stairway, Hester on the other side of the fireplace. Between them was the polished table with two tall candles set in silver sconces. Ellis, leaning over the table, blew out the candles, leaving the fire to light the room. Then, drawing a step backward, he regarded his prisoners with curiosity. The weird, crimson radiance of the fire threw into bold relief the lithe figure of the young Indian, his arms bound tightly behind him, yet bearing himself fearlessly. Ellis turned from him to Hester. She, too, stood motionless and erect, her clear eyes raised unfalteringly, her face as cold and white as marble. There was small trace in her imperious bearing of the despairing figure of scarce a minute past.

“Look you, fellow,” said he, addressing Cochise. “There’s a rumour out that Washington will attack New York. Know you whether ‘tis true or false?”

Cochise deigned no reply. Ellis waited a moment, then burst out fiercely:

“Answer me, you dog of an Indian! Answer me! Is this true?”

“M’sieu, I will not say.” This in a low voice without passion.

Ellis made a furious gesture and clenched his teeth with rage. “As I live you shall not elude me again! Tell me if there be any movements up yonder, or by my soul you shall die!” He panted out the words in a savage whisper.

Cochise looked at him in disdain, then, raising his head, and drawing his noble figure to its fullest height, he said calmly:

“M’sieu, I can die, but I cannot betray!”

The words fired Ellis’s wrath to molten heat.

“Die you shall!” He swept his hand toward the clock on the staircase. “If you tell me not before the five minutes are past, you die so surely as I draw breath!”

“M’sieu’ le capitaine is pleased to threaten. He is brave to those within his power.”

Had a magic power fixed the three actors in attitudes of breathless waiting they had not been more still. Ellis studied the floor, his fury scarce suppressed; Hester, half-stunned, seemed without power to move; but the one whose life was forfeit showed no sign of shrinking; not the faintest

shadow of fear was hid in the Indian's flashing eyes.

With a sharp laugh, Ellis drew out his pistol and examined it with malicious care.

"You've had your chance, monsieur; now you shall die!" he cried.

But before he could raise the pistol, before he could even move, Hester flung herself upon him, seizing his wrists with a wild grasp.

"You shall not kill him!" she gasped. "For my sake have mercy!" Regarding not the Indian's protesting cry, heeding not that the pistol was almost against her cheek, she clung to Ellis with her utmost strength, looking into his face with eyes, imploring, compelling. Cochise, nearly beside himself at Hester's danger, strained wildly at the rope that bound his arms. Ellis, against his will, found his gaze drawn to that of the girl who held him. Then, slowly yielding to some unspoken power, Ellis shook her from him, and thrust the pistol back into his belt.

"So be it!" he said, as if to himself, "You shall not die to-night, but if by sunrise you reveal not all the truth, there's a tree yonder in the forest that will help another spy from hence!" He turned to Hester, who leaned, half-fainting against the wall, "Am I not kind, my pretty suppliant?"

"They that be with us are more than they that be with you," she murmured softly. "The

Mightiest of all fights with us, and in that might I defy all your power!"

"What mean you, fair defier? What strength is yours?"

She lifted her eyes and raised her outstretched hand.

"The strength of the God of the Hills!" she cried, in triumph.

For a second Ellis's cold face softened strangely, a change clear as the lightning's flash, and as brief. His mouth grew hard again; at once he called to his men to remove the prisoners. As Hester ascended the stair he flung her a mocking kiss, and cried, "Adieu till morn, sweet maid."

Once more locked within her room, she lit the half-burnt candle and crept to the window. The rain had ceased and a star shone above the ruined court. She leaned as far out as she dared, searching against hope for a way of escape; then drew back, shuddering, for there was nothing below, save the hard stones of the pavement. It would mean instant death! She was young and her hold on life was strong. She began to walk back and forth, seeking refuge from the thoughts that came to torture her. Old memories, old hopes, happy dreams that would not die, flowed in ceaseless current from the far sweet past. The gown she had worn at the dance; the song she had sung at her spinning; the hills at Bennington beneath the sum-

mer moonlight; even the scent of the locusts by the Tavern lived again in her anguished thoughts. Then the sunshine faded from the picture, and she saw the shadows of those days; shadows of that dial that had ever pointed to a sadder time; her fear for her father, her dread of the man who was now her captor, the warning of Cochise,—all came and spared her not.

There was but an inch of candle left, and thinking to save it for a greater need, she put it out and groped her way to bed. But still the sweet and cruel memories haunted her, and held her fast. She drew from her breast a slip of paper—only a fragment that held in its torn folds a sprig of evergreen,—and pressed it to her lips; and her tears fell in the darkness.

In her heart she denounced Allan Kinsdale as a coward. He had not moved a finger to save her!

Oh, for Ethan Allen's men, to gallop to her deliverance! Oh, for the touch of the hand, the sound of the kindly voice of Ethan Allen, the rescuer, the man whose name was justice!

She sank at last into a troubled sleep, and then she dreamed Ellis had her upon his horse, and they rode through the gloomy forest to the distant city. It was night, and she was numb with fear. Before them lay a river and a bridge, and suddenly in crossing she had thrown herself from the horse's back and was falling down into the darkness!

Her terror roused her. She sprang shuddering from the bed, and with shaking fingers struck the flint and steel and lit the candle. So real had been the horror of her dream that the tears were streaming down her cheeks and her whole form was quivering with sobs. The light calmed her a little, though it was but the calm of despair, and sitting down she watched the slender flame. The house was still as death; any sound would have been less awesome. She thought of the wounded man, and wondered if he were still alive; and then she knelt and tried to pray.

The candle flickered low and went out, and with it died Hester's last hope. With a low cry she flung herself on the floor and lay there, pressing her face against the bare boards.

CHAPTER XXII

THE ANSWER OF ETHAN ALLEN

SOME three or four hours later, in the darkest hour between dawn and midnight, a stealthy step sounded up the stair, moving slowly and cautiously as if fearful of rousing those below. Hester, in that half-consciousness which is not sleep and is not waking, heard it, and started to her feet, trembling in every nerve. So intense was the darkness that she could not see the wall before her, yet she stumbled blindly toward the window and climbed to the low sill, gripping the wide edge with both hands.

With her face turned to the door, she waited in mute despair. This time the key yielded so softly that she did not detect the sound, and the door swung slowly open to admit—Allan Kinsdale! Holding a candle above his head, he glanced searchingly around the room.

“Where are you, madam?” she heard him whisper. Then as he caught sight of her, “There is one hope left! Come with me softly and make haste!”

Bewildered, she crept toward him, thankful for

the moccasins that made her footsteps noiseless. Without a word of explanation he took her hand and drew her out into the hall, then, leaning over the stairway, listened intently for several moments. Beckoning her to follow, he began to descend the stair, pausing at every step to shade his eyes, and search the dim space below.

Having reached the main floor at last, he opened a door beneath the staircase and stole warily along the edge of the courtyard to a narrow passage in the rear wall of the mansion. Here he unlocked another door, and she suddenly found herself in the open air, on the verge of the woods behind the house. As they emerged into the outer darkness a tall figure appeared before them, and a low voice demanded anxiously, "Oh, mam'selle, is it you?"

Hardly able to restrain a cry, Hester darted forward, clasping the hands of the young Indian, while she breathed one word, "Cochise!"

The hands that held hers trembled, but she did not guess the cause, though she heard him whisper:

"How may I thank the Holy God for saving you, mam'selle!"

Allan Kinsdale put out his light, and coming to the Indian's side, spoke rapidly:

"Have you the horses?"

"Yes, M'sieu'."

"Then in Heaven's name, make haste! I have

bribed some, and drugged others, but if Ellis wakes, your fate will be a thousand times the worse!"

Well within the shadow of the trees, a few rods distant from the house, stood two horses, ready saddled. Allan led Hester toward them; as they went, she whispered softly:

"Are you not endangering your life by releasing us?"

"Be not anxious, madam, I know not but I am saving it, for had you remained a prisoner I should have challenged Ellis rather than that he should work his will. And you have seen the deadly effect of his swordsmanship."

Although but half-assured, she did not answer at once, for they had reached the horses, and Allan was helping her to mount. The mist had lifted, and by the faint light of the stars she saw intensified upon his face that nobleness that years of degradation had not destroyed. Instinctively she leaned forward, saying:

"Captain Kinsdale, you are too brave, too generous a man to live amid such company. How can you bear to look upon so terrible a scene as that of—" Here she paused, shuddering and did not end the sentence. "Oh, that poor man, does he yet live? Yet I heard them say he fought because of me."

"He died an hour ago," said Allan Kinsdale.

"I knew full well he could not live till dawn. Ellis is no bungler with the sword."

"Great Heaven, he is dead!" she almost sobbed. "And it was I that killed him!" Her mind reeled beneath the thought. "Will the memory haunt me always?"

"Nay, nay, madam," interrupted Allan gently, "blame not yourself for that. His fate must have overtaken him sooner or later, for he and Ellis were ever at variance."

During this hurried conversation Cochise had been busy tightening the saddle-girths and carefully loading his musket. He now leaped into the saddle and was ready to set off. Hester, however, delayed long enough to lay her hand on Allan Kinsdale's and say in a low whisper:

"Oh, sir, I am helpless to repay you for this night's noble work. I can show my heart's gratitude only by asking you to do another thing." She fixed her pleading eyes upon his face, and her voice became at once commanding and beseeching. "Promise me that you will henceforth live no more with these murderers."

Allan Kinsdale took the hand that lay in his, and put it reverently to his lips.

"I promise," he said solemnly. "You have reclaimed me, fair Hester. Now farewell! keep to the open road and spare not the horses. Go, and may God protect you!"

He freed her hand and stepped aside. Cochise and Hester rode forward into the heart of the starlit night.

For twenty rods they kept to the strip of grass that fringed the wood, then, once out of echo of the house, wheeled boldly to the westward and began the descent of the slope they had climbed as prisoners two days before. Below them the river lay dark and still. Their horses, swift and sure-footed, were well accustomed to the steep path, and in a brief time brought them to its level and the road that wound along the bank. It was not till they had ridden for some miles that Hester drew a long breath.

For the most part silence fell between them, for the joy of their new-born liberty was too great for speech. Then, too, they were not yet out of danger, though every passing mile was a barrier between them and capture. On, on they rode at their utmost speed through marsh and thicket, over hill and upland, splashing through the mud of the ill-made roads, fording the streams where bridges had been swept away, never drawing rein, ever galloping onward, till the stars went down, and the thick white mist that cloaked the mountains crept across the water and wrapped them in its billowy folds. They crossed the great river by an ancient ferry, and began their journey anew. They passed West Point, its lofty outlines looming

darkly through the fog, and now they began to be hailed by the American sentries, who, at a word from Cochise, let them pass without delay. Now that they were inside the patriot lines, with the fear of capture lessened, Hester realised that she was faint with weariness. Despite her keen anxiety, she found her eyelids closing, and but for the young half-breed's guiding hand upon her rein her horse would soon have lost his footing. But as yet they did not dare to pause, and it was not till the horses were showing signs of exhaustion that they ventured to take a slower pace and look about them for shelter. The last of the stars had faded, and wood and hill were folded in the chill mist of an autumn morning. The faint orange of an October sunrise showed along the east, and before them, out of the eddying mist, a house loomed in sharp relief against the brightening sky. Cochise regarded Hester with tender pity; she was swaying in her saddle from sheer exhaustion.

"Mam'selle," he said gently, "think you not we should stop here? You are too weary to go another mile."

She opened her eyes with a shiver. "Go you, and knock, Cochise. It may be they will give us food, and let us rest a while."

She crept slowly from the saddle and stood leaning against the horse's neck. Cochise, fling-

The Answer of Ethan Allen 345

ing his bridle-rein over his arm, advanced to the doorstep and knocked imperatively. The first trial was ineffectual, and it was not till he had thrice repeated it that an upper window was thrown open and a head well-concealed beneath its nightcap was thrust forth, as a woman's voice demanded clearly, "Who wants me?"

"Oh, madam," cried Hester piteously, "will you not have mercy upon us, and give us shelter for a little while? We have ridden many miles, and we are exhausted."

For a moment the woman stared in amazement at the speaker, then answered quickly, "You shall have shelter and welcome. Do but wait and I will come and let you in."

She disappeared from the window, and in a surprisingly short time they heard the bars of the door withdrawn, and their hostess, standing on the threshold, called to them to enter. At sight of the refugees, bearing in face and figure the signs of their desperate ride, she paused in astonishment. Hester, wrapped in Allan Kinsdale's cloak, bare-headed and shivering in the chill air, her face almost startling in its ashen beauty, roused all that was motherly in the woman's nature. Instinctively she took Hester's cold fingers in her warm hands and drew her tenderly inside, the young half-breed following. But Hester gave a frightened glance over her shoulder, saying in a whisper,

"Are we safe here? Can it be they will follow us thus far?"

"Nay, child," cried the woman gently, "have no fear. None will harm you here."

Hester explained their situation in a few words, but before she had finished, her hostess, drawing the settle closer to the fire, dispatched Cochise to the kitchen for wood, and helped the girl remove her wet cloak. Hester sank half-fainting upon the settle. It was but the natural reaction from great despair. Her nerves, strained to their highest tension by the events of the past few days, now relaxed, and she shook from head to foot with convulsive sobs.

The woman made her lie down, wrapping her in a thick coverlet, and left, presently returning with a cup of hot herb tea.

"Drink it, my dear," she said. "It will give you strength. You should have English tea, but as you are a Whig, I know you would not take it."

Hester's befriender was a woman of well over sixty, who still retained in face and figure the healthful lines of her youth. She heard the whole of Hester's story with a sympathy that was limitless; and she would not leave her, she declared, till Mrs. Robinson and Polly had been found. She insisted that the travellers should not start upon their journey till Hester was entirely recovered from her terrible experiences.

"The Albany coach passes here on Monday, my dear, and by Thursday morning you can easily reach the city. But you must go to bed and rest; it is a wonder you are not ill with what you have endured."

Hester's relief, as she climbed into the great, white-curtained bed in the chamber upstairs, was so great that the tears came again for very joy. Notwithstanding her deep anxiety for her mother and Polly, a sense of peace possessed her; the peace of those who, after weary wandering, have at last found rest and refuge. Hope seemed nearer; reunion with those she loved more of a certainty. The dark and fearful days so lately past would fade away and be forgotten in the sweet promise of the future. With a sigh of contentment she nestled down beneath the fragrant blankets.

When she awoke, late in the afternoon, she found her friend sitting by the bed, a bit of knitting between her busy fingers. The good woman would not allow her to rise, but brought her some supper, then resumed her seat by the bedside, and talked with her in a low, pleasant voice. She told Hester that she had recently come from England in search of a nephew who had left home years before, and of whose whereabouts she was wholly ignorant. Tears sprang to her eyes at the remembrance, and her voice grew tremulous.

"He was my brother's son," she continued softly, "but I love him as my own. His mother died when he was very young, poor lad; perhaps if she had lived, he had not come to evil."

Hester listened with deep interest.

A soft grey twilight filled the room, and this hour of light and shadow seemed all in keeping with the memories that underlay this woman's life.

"Aye, there were few like him," the wistful voice went on, "straight and strong of body, and honest and upright of soul till he fell into temptation. Whatever were his sins, he yet had honour and had truth. Oh, my lad, my lad! It is God alone that knows where he may be now, and whether he is alive or dead." Her voice fell lower still and she spoke as if to herself. "Even as a lad, there was none more noble. Often have I seen him pull off his coat and fight another's battles because that other one was weak. Had he not been generous as he was brave, he had not been our Allan."

"Allan?" echoed Hester in surprise, thinking of her rescuer.

"Aye, Allan Kinsdale, the noblest lad that ever breathed! I came to seek him, but no trace of him has fortune granted me." She broke off, startled at Hester's exclamation, "But, dear child, what is the matter? What is wrong?"

Hester was sitting up in bed, her eyes starry with excitement.

“Oh, madam,” she cried in tones trembling with eagerness, “Allan Kinsdale was the name of the brave young man who set us free!”

For a moment Mistress Kinsdale sat motionless, stunned by the import of the words. Then, starting forward, she caught the girl in a convulsive grasp, sobbing brokenly:

“Oh, my child, my child, have you come as an angel of mercy to one who had lost all hope? Oh, Allan, Allan, thank God he is not dead!”

Twilight merged into darkness, but still she knelt beside the bed with her arms clasped about the girl, and her face bowed in prayer.

When the fugitives had ridden away from him into the night, Allan Kinsdale lingered for some moments beneath the deep shade of the trees, then, swiftly and cautiously began to retrace his steps toward the gloomy house. Entering by the way he came out, he strode rapidly to the room which he and Ellis occupied as a chamber. He regained it in safety, and with a triumphant glance at his sleeping comrade was about to extinguish his candle, when Ellis, aroused by the light, stirred, sat up, and after staring at him for a moment, exclaimed sharply:

“What in thunder are you roaming round for, this time of night, you idiot?”

Allan answered calmly:

“My dear Ellis, I just stepped out for a moment to cool my heated brow. This accursed room is hot enough to supply the underworld.”

Ellis continued to stare at him, half-perplexed, then suspicion dawning in his mind, he sprang up, with what intention could not be said, for an interruption occurred in the form of a drunken soldier, who flung himself with immense clatter into the room.

“Two of our horses has been stole, Cap’n!” he shouted, none too clearly. Ellis’s rapid mind comprehended the matter at a leap.

“Perdition seize you, traitor!” he cried to Allan. “You let my prisoners escape, did you? You shall die in the Indian’s stead!”

With a curse he snatched his pistol from the bed where he had flung it, and wheeling, fired it at his recreant comrade. Surely some kind fate averted the shot, else Allan had paid dearly for his noble kindness to Hester. Before Ellis could fire again, Allan’s sword was out, and the flash of the dangerous blade had driven the tipsy soldier from his post by the door. Allan, seeing discretion to be the better part of valour, retreated rapidly through the doorway and down the stairs, with Ellis at his heels, crying fiercely to his men to seize the fugitive.

But the greater part of the band were in ill condition to meet any emergency, being in such a dazed and maudlin state that for some moments they did nothing but stare blankly after Ellis's flying figure. At length a few of them rallied their scattered senses and started in pursuit. By this time Allan was across the court and had nearly reached the door in the wall by which Hester had escaped. Before he could gain the opening a number of his pursuers threw themselves across his path, and he was forced to pause and defend himself. He had now reached the rear of the courtyard, but the door was still some yards to his right. Allan, standing against the wall, fought desperately, his swift sword forming a wide half-circle of gleaming steel. Most of the men were armed only with sabres, and those who had pistols fired them so unsteadily that, though the bullets cut the bricks above his head, he himself went untouched. Ellis, half-mad with rage, raised his empty pistol as if to fire, then dashing it to the ground, wrenched out his sword and tried with furious skill to strike down Allan's blade.

“Seize him, men!” he panted between locked teeth, “seize him, you cowards! He shall hang for this night's work, so sure as I draw breath!”

Allan, holding him at bay, laughed in sheer recklessness.

“So you've lost your partner, Captain Ellis,” he

mocked. "Your pretty bird has flown away. I fear me you must seek another maid. Alas, how sad a plight!"

Ellis's deadly swordsmanship for once was of no avail for him. He could not break through his opponent's guard, for Allan, moving ceaselessly, kept him at too great a distance. The torches flickered wildly over the maddened faces of the men; the spurred boots clattered loudly on the thick stones underfoot; but in the confusion of light and sound Allan did not once lose control of himself. With his coat torn and slashed, and the blood trickling from his wounded shoulder, he kept a dozen blades from closing at his breast, while he retreated slowly, backing step by step toward the open doorway. At last he gained it, darted like a flash through the narrow passage, burst through the outer door, and ran for his life toward the ruined stable. He reached it, leaped to the back of his horse, and swinging his sword above his head dashed straight across the path of his defeated foes and wheeled full gallop into the rift of pines. There he turned with a mocking gesture, shouted, "Adieu, my friends. Seize me, if you dare!" and disappeared beneath the slope.

It was on Friday, the 9th of October, that Hester and Cochise found shelter at the house of Mistress Kinsdale, and Hester, at least, had good cause

to remember the visit, since it was linked so closely with her after-life. Mistress Kinsdale's first act on the day after their arrival was to find some more suitable apparel for Hester than the torn and faded gown the girl had worn. From an old chest that always stood in a corner of her bedroom she took out some dainty garments that had once belonged to a niece of hers, a sister of Allan's, long since dead. These, her final treasures, Mistress Kinsdale deemed none too worthy for the girl whose words had filled her life with hope. When Hester donned her quaint finery and came tripping down the stairs she seemed a goddess to the eyes of Cochise, and Mistress Kinsdale kissed her with an overflowing heart.

On Monday, the 12th of October, the three set out for Albany, taking the clumsy, jolting coach with its four mud-splashed horses, at their very door. Hester's youthful health had quickly dispelled the effects of her past hardships, though there was still anxiety for those she went to seek. How many miles lay between her and heart's desire! The world was very wide; would those she loved be waiting for her in the distant city? Should she ever find them there? Oh, the wretchedness of having to return to Stephen Fay without them! Surely stranger travellers never fared along the rough road to Albany.

They clattered into town on Thursday to find

the old Dutch city in the midst of a vivid golden sunrise. Its narrow winding streets, paved with uneven cobblestones, its quaint taverns, flaunting their curious Holland signs, its clean brick houses with their odd dividing doors, suggested another land than her own to Hester. When the stage drew up in front of the principal inn of the city her heart leaped violently. She trembled so as she alighted from the coach that she caught at the door for support, and the power to speak seemed to have deserted her.

The inn-keeper, with many bows, led Hester and Mistress Kinsdale to the parlour, while the inn-keeper's wife bustled about them. Before Hester could find voice to ask a question, Cochise entered. The joy in his face told of some welcome news.

"Mam'selle," he said, "they are found. They are here, even in this place."

Hester stood motionless with clasped hands, unable to answer, but Mistress Kinsdale breathed softly, "Thank God!"

The joy of that reunion was great. Beyond the terrible weight of their anxiety for Hester, Mrs. Robinson and Polly had not suffered, for their captors had proved their friends, and the inn at Albany a safe refuge. It seemed also that General Gates had concerned himself in their behalf, for a searching party had been sent out after Hester and Cochise, and every effort was made to gain tidings

of the lost girl. That the mission was fruitless was due only to Mark Ellis and his band.

It was now decided that the travellers should make no further effort to reach New York, but should remain in Albany till they could hear from Ezra Robinson. On the day after their reunion Hester wrote to her father, telling of their situation, and relating the events that led up to it; and found occasion to send the letter under a flag of truce. As some time must elapse before an answer, the three adapted themselves to their new surroundings, finding life very pleasant in the cosy Albany inn. Allan had given Cochise several pounds to be used for Hester's needs, and this, with the money from Stephen Fay, would keep them comfortable for a month at least. Moreover, all wants seemed trivial, now they were together.

Meanwhile Colonel Allen had by no means forgotten his promise to Hester. When, upon his return from Connecticut, he learned that the Robinsons were on their way to seek refuge at New York, his wrath burst out anew against the Council. Patience was a thing quite foreign to his impetuous nature, and while his brother, Ira, manœuvred with skilful diplomacy to bring the Robinson case to a propitious ending, Ethan employed the time in attacking every member of the Council that he met. As may be imagined, these denunciations

were of a vigorous nature, such as might well intimidate the fearful. Their effect, however, was less noticeable immediately upon the Council than on the good people of Bennington, who adored their hero, and now speedily followed his way of thinking.

When the session was called during the last week of September, Colonel Allen could scarcely restrain his impatience at what he called their "eternal indecision." When, on the day after the meeting, he learned that nothing definite had been done, and that the Council had "adjourned for twenty-four hours," his rage revealed itself in a most decided form. He was at breakfast in Sunderland when the news reached him, and he sprang up with a bound that set the dishes clattering.

"The devil seize them!" he shouted. "If he don't, I will, and I swear there's not much choice! Mary," this to his wife, "I'm off to Holy Hill to settle these creatures before I'm an hour older."

He withdrew precipitately, and Mrs. Allen saw him leap to Rebel's back and vanish at a gallop down the road to Bennington. He reached the Tavern before ten o'clock, and leaving Rebel nibbling the grass at the foot of the sign strode up the path and knocked fiercely with his scabbard upon the well-worn panels. The door was opened by a negro boy of fifteen, who stared, open-mouthed, at the bold figure on the doorstep.

“Is the Captain in?” demanded Allen.

The boy said yes, but added rather timidly that “the Cap’n was busy.”

“Hang the business! Let the business go to the devil!” was the reply. “Is the Council in session? Stop gaping, you fool, and answer my question!”

Assured that the Councillors were indeed within, the Colonel stalked boldly across the hall and entered the august precincts with small ceremony. At sight of him, tall and imposing in his Continental uniform, a suppressed smile flickered over the faces of those present. The Colonel took no notice of it. He swept a haughty glance over the assemblage, and sat down with much dignity. The Council were discussing an act of the law governing Tories, some arguing for one side, some for another. Ethan Allen thought he read the defeat of Hester’s cause. On the first opportunity he sprang to his feet, exclaiming hotly:

“For forms of government let fools contest;
Whate’er is best administered, is best.”

Then, turning to the young lawyer, whose remarks had irritated him, he shouted fiercely: “You’re in the wrong, I say; you’re in the wrong! I would have you know that with my logic, and reasoning from the eternal fitness of things, I can

upset your Blackstones, your whitestones, your grave-stones, and your brimstones."

A laugh ran round the room. Allen paused to take breath, then plunged into fiery defence of Hester's cause; now appealing to their sense of right, now threatening them with dire punishment if they failed to execute justice. It was a curious form of eloquence, none the less moving on account of its sudden changes from one mode of address to another. Nor did the speaker cease till he had finished all he had come to say. When at last he reached the end, Ira Allen, who had watched him with a mischievous smile, rose, and going to a desk near by, opened a drawer and took out a paper. He crossed the room and gave it to his brother, saying, gravely, "Now, Colonel, we are not so wicked as you suppose. Look at this!"

The paper was a deed of the Robinson farm, made out in Hester's name. For a moment Ethan Allen stood silent. Ira, resting a hand on his brother's shoulder, shot another arch glance at his fellow-Councillors, who were vainly endeavouring to repress their laughter. For once they thought they had confounded Ethan Allen. They little knew the man with whom they had to deal. Looking around him with his old imperious mien, Ethan Allen said gravely:

"My learned fellow-statesmen, I see you have at last come to your senses, and awarded righteous

judgment. But, my friends, I know your motive in doing it. You prepared this deed lest I should come—as I did come—and threaten you with a just punishment. Gentlemen, I regret to say that had I not taken this rigorous course this deed would have lain in that drawer till the sounding of the last trump. It is well that I came. Good-day, gentlemen."

Hester, sitting alone on the little side-porch of the Albany inn, learned the news first from her mother, who placed in her hands a sealed letter, saying that a scout had just come in with it. With trembling fingers she opened the dreaded, longed-for letter and read:

"BENNINGTON, September 25th, 1778.

"MISS HESTER ROBINSON,

"*Dear Madam*: I have the Inexpressible Pleasure to Inform you that the Honourable Council of the State of Vermont have herewith decided to revoke their Judgment and restore to you the Property that is rightfully yours. What little Part I had in bringing about this Felicitous Result, has given me a most Sincere Delight. I did but Reap where Ira Sowed; it is he deserves the Praise, not I. Your Property is henceforth yours in Entirety, and I shall soon Hope to have the Joy of your Return to Bennington. I enclose the Deed drawn in your Name. I Trust that you are in Good Health and that this News may Restore your Good Spirits.

Please Convey my most Respectful Regards to your Mother and Cousin. I have the Honour to be your most

“Obedient and Humble Servant

“ETHAN ALLEN.”

With tears of gratitude in her eyes Hester caught the deed and letter to her breast, and laid them in her mother's lap.

“Oh, mother, mother, Colonel Allen is so good, so noble! The dear old home is ours once more!”

She clasped her arms about her mother's neck, and the two wept together.

How happy Hester was that night! There was no room for aught but happiness.

“Perhaps we can start for home in a week,” she thought. “I can scarce wait to see the hills once more, and to be back in Bennington, dear old Bennington!”

A week! So short a time as men count days, and yet so long when measured by thoughts and fears. How little Hester knew how great a change that one short week would bring!

CHAPTER XXIII

NEWS FROM BENNINGTON

THE scout who had come with Ethan Allen's letter proved to be Eleazer Edger-ton, of Bennington, who in '77 had been one of Stark's Rangers. Upon his return to the tavern later in the evening he was told that Mrs. Robinson and Hester wished to see him in the inn parlour, where he received an eager welcome from his exiled fellow-patriots. So it happened that Mrs. Robinson, Hester, and Polly sat till the candles were on the verge of extinction, listening to the scout's varied news of his State and town. He had it all at his tongue's end, and told it willingly to enthusiastic hearers. He described in detail Ethan Allen's stirring defence, as all the town knew it, and dwelt with particular delight upon the manner in which that dauntless hero had confounded the Council.

“There's none can withstand Ethan when he's roused!” Eleazer exclaimed in merriment. “Faith, they say to have seen him outwit the ‘honourable Council’, as he calls 'em, would set you laughing from now to doomsday! He's not to be daunted

by clergy or military, though they do say Parson Dewey got the better of him once. I reckon 'twas only once. Good land! That sets me to thinkin' of another time when Ethan spoke in meetin'." He slapped his knee and fell to laughing softly, as if some irrepressible memory was stirring in his mind. "D'you attend the Thanksgivin' service they had right after he took old Ti?" he questioned, still laughing.

Hester, who knew what was coming, shook her head with sparkling eyes.

"No," said Mrs. Robinson, "we were up in Sunderland then."

"I don't doubt you've heard tell of it before, though it's a tale as bears repeatin'." The evident interest in Hester's eyes encouraged him, and he continued with the relish of a man to whom story-telling is one of life's greatest pleasures. "Well, then, 'twas this way. Y'see Ethan thinks pretty well of himself, as any man's a right to, that 'mounts to anything—for my part I've no use for the folks that's always sayin' their deeds ain't good for naught—it's apt to be about true, but that's neither here nor there—what I was sayin' was that Ethan likes his share of praise, as what man shouldn't that's done what he's done. Well, 'twas one o' those nice warm days when you feel like sleepin' if you've got an easy chair. But there wasn't any sleepin' in church that day. The

meetin'-house was packed as full as a prison, and the folks were as still as clams—I s'pose they're still, I never saw none.—Well, after we'd sung 'Old Hundred,' and 'Before Jehovah's Awful Throne'—my! those old hymns did sound grand, rollin' up to the roof—'The voice of a great multitude and the voice of many waters,'—then the Parson began to pray—as fine a prayer as I ever heard—givin' God all the glory and the honour of deliverin' the fort into our hands. There were a whole lot of officers from Ti, and Ethan with 'em, settin' in a pew up front. Well, in the middle of the prayer I opened my eyes—'twas wicked I don't doubt, but somehow I couldn't help it—and the minute they fell on Ethan I knew somethin' was goin' wrong. His eyes was wide open, an' he was a scowlin' at the Parson, but the Parson didn't see him, 'count of his head bein' bowed. Just then the Colonel sat bolt upright and hollered out, so't we all could hear: '*Parson Dewey! Parson Dewey! Parson Dewey!*' The Parson didn't pay a bit of heed till the third time, and then he opened his eyes and looked straight at the Colonel, just as stern and grim as could be.

"But Ethan wasn't daunted. He just lifted up both hands, and says he to the Parson, pleasant-like, '*Please mention to the Lord that I was there!*' My land! if the Parson wasn't mad! His eyes were blazin' coals. But he didn't say a thing, just

bowed his head again, and went right on with the prayer. But I tell you we folks had a time to keep from laughin' out loud. The girls was gigglin' behind the psalm-books, and Iry laughed to himself all through the last hymn. I wouldn't a missed it for the biggest catamount 'tween here an' Canada!"

While Hester's thoughts turned with tender longing toward the future, far different were the thoughts of Ezra Robinson. Ever since the arrival of Hester's letter telling of the loss of the farm his loyalty to the British cause had been slowly waning. The defeat of Burgoyne, the bold stand of Washington at Monmouth, the prospect that France might aid the struggling Colonies—all these had fed his discontent. Was there a possibility, after all, that those he had scoffed at as rebels might yet be victorious? The idea was appalling. The one motive of his treason had been the hope of a high position under English rule, a revenge for the slights he had received from Congress. He had indeed acquired moderate wealth and rank, but he knew too well that, should Clinton be superseded, he might lose all that he had gained. At first he had soothed himself with the thought that he should probably receive a grant of land in New York State in place of the farm he had forfeited, but this hope had faded with the rest. His

lofty dream was shattered, and he saw that if King George were worsted his lot would be that of a fugitive, homeless and destitute. When autumn came he was already wavering, though as yet he dared not decide upon his course. He had reached the point where a very little thrown into the balance would turn his secret discontent to sharp resistance.

When he received the letter written by Hester at Albany, his decision quickened, and his one desire was to rid himself of his new allegiance. Moreover, now he had a definite object for his enmity, for the letter contained sufficient reference to Mark Ellis to confirm Ezra Robinson's suspicions. Ellis had known of Hester's expected arrival, and rumours had not been wanting of Ellis's doings in the Neutral Ground, or of the fair maid whom he had sought to make his partner at the ball. It was little wonder that Ezra Robinson's hate was kindled against him. He demanded an explanation, but Ellis, nothing daunted, only replied that slander had greatly exaggerated truth; that he had pursued Cochise because the Indian was abducting Hester; that in order to save her he had been forced to capture her; that he had remained at "The Rift in the Pines" because the rebels were between him and White Plains,—all of which would have been a very plausible tale to those who did not understand the true inwardness of the facts.

But Ezra Robinson knew both Ellis and Cochise too well to be deceived. His anger received fresh impetus from this attempted deception, and although he dared not confront Ellis openly,—since on the latter's influence his own position rested,—his rage, suppressed and hidden as it was, grew to such proportions that it needed only the wind of circumstance to fan it to revengeful flame.

This growing enmity between the two whose lives had been so oddly coupled had not begun with Ellis's latest deed. The estrangement had been gradual, but none the less certain, and now the gulf between them was so wide that naught could bridge it. Ellis realised that Ezra Robinson was of no further use to him, nay, more, that this weak, irresolute man was only a hindrance to him; and Ezra Robinson, conscious of his enemy's stronger will, saw that he could never sever his connection with the British cause so long as Ellis chose to exert his power.

The desired opportunity came sooner than Ezra Robinson had imagined; but it was a force outside himself that brought the matter to a head. General Gates, who had long made vain attempts to capture Ellis and his band, now took a further step, and offered a liberal reward for the arrest of the young spy. When Ezra Robinson heard of the act he saw in one swift flash of comprehension that this was the chance he had awaited. By one

adroit stroke he could revenge himself upon Ellis, shake off the ties of an unwelcome cause, gain the favour of Gates, and thus win back in safety to his old allegiance. But he was timorous in matters of artifice, and had been wont to depend on a stronger will, and he knew he must now use the utmost care. He wrote a letter to Gates, stating his position, the reason of his exile from the Grants, and his desire to return to the patriot party. He then offered to betray Mark Ellis into the American hands, provided he himself should be received into his former favour, and that a tract of land near Albany should be given him for his trouble. He couched the letter in terms of the utmost caution, signed it "R. E." and despatched it to Albany by a trusty messenger. Four days later, at a most opportune moment, it came to Gates's hands. The General cared nothing for the rebellious "Grants," nor anything for the acquisition of a recreant Tory; but he desired above all else the arrest of Mark Ellis, and he agreed at once to Ezra Robinson's proposal.

A week later the plot had been perfected, and the threads drawn. The day and hour were set, and the final plans agreed upon. Mark Ellis and Ezra Robinson were to ride out to "The Rift in the Pines," to meet a scheming Tory, who, for reasons of his own, did not wish to come into the city. At a certain hour the American horsemen would

surround the house, and all its inmates would be seized as prisoners. For the sake of his own safety, Ezra Robinson would, to all appearances, be taken with the rest. The whole affair was to be accomplished as quickly and quietly as possible.

On the evening before the appointed day Ezra Robinson sat alone, thinking with restless eagerness of the morrow. His fears that the plot might be discovered had lessened now, for he had reason to think that Ellis was without suspicion. Yet he looked forward to the scene of betrayal with a strange shrinking. It came from no scruples of heart or conscience,—simply a dread of what should happen. But he shook it off, and let his mind drift to other thoughts; the joy of re-union with those he loved,—his wife's smile, Hester's kiss,—dear little Hester, whose fair sweet face implored him to return,—and then the peace of a mind at ease, and a long life of happiness. Who can measure the depths of the soul, where thoughts of vindictive hatred may dwell side by side with tenderest love!

On the appointed evening Ezra Robinson and Mark Ellis rode slowly northward through the Neutral Ground to their rendezvous at the manor-house. They had left White Plains before sun-down, and the hour of meeting was nine, so there was no need for haste. They made the journey almost in silence, each too occupied with his

thoughts for speech. From time to time Ezra Robinson glanced furtively at the man at his side, shuddering inwardly at the secret so soon to be revealed. Mark Ellis rode with head slightly bent, revolving some new scheme of mischief, now and then raising his eyes to sweep the line of road. Why did not some inner voice cry out warning of his danger? Why did not this man, who, with all his recklessness, was ever on the alert, suspect the treachery of his friend? For once Mark Ellis had not rightly measured the character of this false ally; he had staked too much on his own knowledge of human nature; he had thought Ezra Robinson too weak and wavering for any decisive act. There are always the ninety-nine chances against which a man is warned; there will always be the once chance coming unforetold that may prove his undoing.

The dead leaves whirled in eddies round the two men's path, and Ellis's horse shied constantly at the dancing shadows. The wind, too, came in gusts, now stirring the shorn wood with a whir as of wings; now falling to a breathless hush. The night seemed to impress Ellis, for when a fitful gust blew his cloak across his face, he exclaimed, laughing:

“Faith, I'd forgot 'twas All-Hallow-e'en. This accounts for the mood of things; 'tis witch-night, and I swear that all the elves in the nether world are abroad.”

Reaching "The Rift in the Pines" and riding into the deserted courtyard, they were met by a soldier whom Ellis had sent on ahead to prepare for their coming. The man conducted them by the light of his torch through the great hall into the dining-room beside whose fading fire Allan Kinsdale had planned the escape of Hester. Here they found their Tory conspirator awaiting them; a restless, shrinking man with a furtive face. He and the soldier were the only inmates of the house besides themselves; the business was important, and Ellis desired no witnesses.

The servant lit the candles and filled the wine glasses, and then withdrew, while the three pulled their chairs to the table and began the discussion of their project. The moments passed swiftly as they talked; now and then Ezra Robinson cast stealthy glances over his shoulder, and strained his ears for any ominous sound; while the Tory, who was in the treacherous secret, only half-concealed his uneasiness. Fortunately the constant rattle of doors and windows afforded ample excuse for any nervous starts.

The servant, leagued with the traitors, was to watch for the horsemen, acquaint them of the room where Ellis sat, and then, in order to warn Ezra Robinson and further delude Ellis, was to enter with some ordinary remark, before agreed upon, as a sign that all was ready for the betrayal. Ten

o'clock had been the hour set for the deed, and as the hour drew near Ezra Robinson bit his lips to suppress his intense excitement. Ellis was leaning forward, one arm extended along the table, while his other hand encircled his wine glass. His handsome face glowed with a certain reckless brilliance. His blue eyes glittered dangerously. Ezra Robinson, although nearly crazed with the fear of discovery, kept him steadily engaged in conversation.

The door opened gently, and the soldier entered. He took up a decanter and re-filled Ellis's wine glass. As he did so he shot a glance at the other two. Ezra Robinson held his breath.

"Shall I bring more candles, sir?" said the soldier, addressing Ellis. It was the signal for attack. Ezra Robinson rose, gripping the table in his emotion.

"Shall we drink to the King?" he said.

The soldier went out with stealthy swiftness, leaving the door ajar. It was the crucial moment. The time had come!

CHAPTER XXIV

“ UNTIL THE DAY BREAK ”

EZRA Robinson ceased to speak, and stood with lifted glass, looking fixedly at Ellis, who drank with a will, little heeding his companion's agitation.

There followed a moment of absolute silence, broken by a precipitate rush of feet as doors and windows were flung rudely open and a dozen Continentals burst into the room and sprang upon the three conspirators. Ellis was seized before he could free his pistol, and, according to the pre-concerted plan, two troopers laid hands on Ezra Robinson, while the rest threw themselves upon the shrinking Tory, who, at the first signal of assault, had scurried into the farthest corner. Ellis stood disarmed, at last, and Ezra Robinson's heart leaped with fierce delight. His exultation broke all bounds; he trampled caution under foot. Shaking aside the troopers, who readily loosed their hold, he took a step toward Mark Ellis.

“ Oho, spy! Miscreant! Persecutor of a helpless maid! You've run your course at last! You

thought Ezra Robinson was not man enough to bring your schemes to naught! You shall answer for your misdeeds to Gates himself! ”

He hissed out the words in a voice that shook with triumph.

A fearful change came over Mark Ellis. His whole form grew tense, as if every nerve were contracted by rage. His supple figure assumed the rigidness of a crouching catamount and his face took on an almost fiendish beauty, as if it held incarnate the very spirit of vindictive passion. His eyes dilated like those of a trapped animal. His gaze, as he turned on his betrayer, was so terrible that Ezra Robinson shrank under it, as from a scorching flame. For a breath there was silence, then Ellis, with a sudden effort, flung himself free from his captors' hold, cried in a strange, hard whisper: “Traitor, if I go, you go with me! You shall never live to see Mark Ellis die! ” and wrenching a pistol from his breast, fired with steady hand at his betrayer.

The shot sped true. With a groan Ezra Robinson sank backward, and would have fallen to the floor had not a soldier caught and held him. Ellis made no attempt at escape, and offered no resistance when the pistol was wrested from his grasp and his arms were bound.

In the midst of the tumult the door opened and there paused upon the threshold a young officer in

the uniform of a captain, to whose lips there sprang a startled cry! It was Nathan Bennett!

As by a magnet his gaze seemed drawn to that of the young spy, in his eyes an agonised dread, in Ellis's unconcealed amazement.

The cry Nathan uttered was rent from his very heart!

“George! My brother!”

Under the passionate longing gaze of a love that would not die, Ellis's proud face changed and softened as if some other self had come to life again. The present faded; in a moment both were transported to a past whose memories moved them both.

The interval was brief; a groan from the wounded man dispelled it. Nathan turned and beheld Ezra Robinson. The torture of that moment burned into his very soul. He heard them say that Ellis had fired the shot, but the only thought that penetrated his consciousness as he knelt beside the victim of this mad act was of Hester's anguish at her father's fate. He could see that the shot was mortal. Ezra Robinson, ghastly pale, half-reclined in a chair, while one of the soldiers supported him and another fastened a rude bandage. At the young captain's command they bore him up the stair and laid him upon the great bed in the very chamber which had been Hester's prison not a month before; while Nathan

Bennett, though knowing that all skill was useless, despatched a messenger for a physician.

The great vaulted chamber, lit by its two dim candles and thronged with ghostly shadows, seemed a fitting place for the end of such a life as this; yet all its awesome gloom was not more sombre than were the thoughts of Nathan Bennett as he sat by the foot of the bed in hopeless waiting. Ezra Robinson lay with closed eyes, only an occasional slight movement betraying signs of life. When last these two had met it had been in the tent at Baum’s camp, with the light of the brushwood fire on their faces, and anger in the hearts of both. And now! Oh, Heaven, what a change! This haunted house in the midst of a wasted country, this great dim room a very stage of tragedy, midnight and approaching death!

Ezra Robinson stirred, and opened his eyes. As they rested upon Nathan Bennett he gave a start of terror and passed his hand across his brow as if in disbelief of what he saw. Evidently in the first moment of half-consciousness when the young captain bent over him he had not recognised him. “Nathan Bennett!” he exclaimed in a startled whisper.

Another pang smote Nathan. Was it not enough that he must see Ezra Robinson die by the hand of his own brother without the added misery that his own presence should imbitter this man’s

last hours? He rose and quietly withdrew to the upper hall, where he stood looking out over the dim court. An hour after midnight the surgeon arrived. He examined the wound and shook his head, and presently he came out to where Nathan Bennett was waiting in the hall. "'Tis hopeless, lad," he said gently, "his race is run. 'Twill be only a few hours at most."

A little later Nathan Bennett was summoned by a message that the dying man wished to speak to him.

As he approached the bedside Ezra Robinson motioned the others to leave the room, and when they had gone lay for some time without speaking, his eyes upon the flickering candle-flame. Then, rousing himself with an effort, he turned toward Nathan Bennett:

"I am dying," he said slowly, "and there lies that between us which must be settled ere I go." He paused, then continued in stronger tone: "I have wronged you bitterly. Once, in a moment of passion, I tried to kill you, and I have said that I would rather see Hester dead than your wife. I misjudged you; I thought of you as a mere adventurer; I treated you cruelly; and yet you have dealt with me as a true man and a gentleman. You will not bear malice now when I am near to death?"

He ceased abruptly, exhausted with the effort of

speaking, his eyes bent imploringly upon the young man's face.

“Mr. Robinson,” answered Nathan Bennett solemnly, “I treasure no hatred against you. As I hope for God's forgiveness, so do I forgive you. And if in aught I have injured you, if in being forced to deceive you I dealt unjustly, I pray you to pardon me, that in this hour all bitterness be swept away from between us.”

Ezra Robinson, whose strength was waning fast, lay motionless, as if to let these words sink deeper into his troubled mind.

Suddenly he took Nathan Bennett's hand in his, and carried it to his breast, saying faintly, “There is a letter. Take and read it.” Nathan Bennett, feeling the paper between his fingers, drew it forth carefully, and held it to the candle-light. It was the letter from Hester. With the hand of the dying man still locked in his, Nathan read slowly.

“She is betrothed to you,” said Ezra, in a faint voice. “You shall say to her that my greatest wish is that she should marry you; that you alone of all men are worthy of her love and trust.” And then in anguished longing, “Oh, my little Hester! that I might see you once before I die!”

Nathan shuddered.

“Mr. Robinson,” he said, “there is that which I must tell you first. Heaven knows I had spared you the knowledge if I could, but honour compels

me to speak. Ere you give your consent to Hester's marriage with me, hear the truth: the man who shot you, the man whom you knew as Mark Ellis, is my brother, George Bennett!"

Horror and surprise contended on the face of Ezra Robinson. With his last strength he raised himself, crying hoarsely:

"Great Heaven, it cannot be! You are but mocking me!"

Yet he read the truth on Nathan's averted face. Sinking back, he murmured faintly: "If it be so, who am I to judge another?" and then aloud, "It matters not. You still stand blameless, nor should bear the weight of another's sin. You alone shall Hester wed!" He laid his hand on Nathan Bennett's. "Bring me pen and paper. I will write and tell her all my wish concerning you. Make haste, make haste, my sands are running fast."

Nathan Bennett rose to obey, but before he placed the pen in Ezra Robinson's feeble fingers, he added solemnly:

"Consider, Mr. Robinson, what a cruelty you may be doing your daughter in urging upon her marriage with a man whose brother took her father's life. Would you force her to such a fate, tortured as she must be with such memories?"

Ezra Robinson groaned, held in a grip of anguish far beyond his physical suffering; but he

took the pen and began to write, as if some resistless power drove him on. Now and again he paused out of sheer weakness, and Nathan Bennett, who supported him, held brandy to his lips. When at last he had ended, he turned faint, and sank back.

Through the long hours of the waning night Nathan Bennett sat motionless beside the bed, while on the opposite side the surgeon, with his hand on the pulse of the dying man, waited in patience for the end. Just as the first faint glimmer of the Sabbath dawn came creeping into the dim old room Ezra Robinson's eyes unclosed, and again they fell on Nathan Bennett with a startled look.

“Come nearer, lad,” he whispered; then as the young man bent over him: “I had nigh forgotten . . . I must warn you—Go not near New York, Nathan; take heed that you be not taken prisoner.” He paused for breath; while Nathan Bennett, who thought his mind was wandering, tried to reassure him. But the struggling soul clung tenaciously to its last earthly purpose.

“Nay, nay, this is no madness!” he cried with passion; “you were captured not long since by Clinton's men? Then for Heaven's sake, stay not here. Go back to the Jerseys. If you fall a prisoner into Clinton's hands, he swears you shall hang for breaking your parole!”

Despite the deep solemnity of the moment Nathan Bennett's eyes flashed with anger.

"Clinton lied!" he cried. "Upon my sacred honour I swear the thing is false!"

Before another word could be spoken, Ezra Robinson had lapsed into the unconscious state of the past few hours, and when at length he awoke his mind dwelt no more amid the present, but had journeyed back into the clear unshadowed days of years long past. His strength was all but gone, and Nathan Bennett thought the end already come, but one last memory stayed the passing soul. It is a peaceful summer Sunday in old New London, and he sits, a boy, in the church on the hill, and hears again the voice of the old minister. One long forgotten verse returns, and now, when his breath falters and his strength fails, it sweeps aside the wreck of ruined years and lights his face with sudden joy.

"Until—the day—break,—and the shadows—flee away," he murmured faintly. And thus he died.

At sunrise of that first day of November they buried him beneath the pines.

And now there lay before Nathan Bennett the most appalling duty of his life; that of delivering his brother into the hands of those who should decide his fate. But though his heart was torn between the wild desire to save his brother and the

necessity of obeying his country's bidding, he held, unswerving, to the path of a patriot's duty. He took his prisoner to West Point, and then, his bitter errand done, appealed for mercy to the court who were to try him. General Putnam, then in command at West Point, felt a deep sympathy for the young officer who, during his two months' service at the fort, had proved himself so brave and true a soldier, and he knew something of Nathan Bennett's history from General Wayne. When Gates had ordered that a captain and a band of men should be despatched down the river to arrest a certain spy, Putnam had chosen Nathan Bennett for the undertaking, and the young man had gone upon his mission, not knowing, till he faced Mark Ellis in that room at “The Rift in the Pines,” the name of the man he had been sent to capture. So now it was owing to Putnam that Ellis was allowed the vain privilege of a trial, for the rules of war sanctioned the execution of a spy with small formality of a court-martial.

Late that afternoon the trial was held. The entire proceedings were but a form of justice, since all knew that the sentence was inevitable. Nathan Bennett, pale and haggard, trembling with emotion, made a passionate plea in his brother's behalf, praying that the decree of death be changed to imprisonment. The court listened with deference to his entreaties, then inquired if the prisoner

had any defence to make. Mark Ellis had stood throughout the trial haughty and indifferent, his proud blue eyes either fixed on the window or turned in calm defiance on his judges. Now he faced the court with all his old audacious bearing.

“Faith, gentlemen,” he laughed, “I rejoice that I gave you rebels a pretty chase and cost you dear before you caught me, and I vow you’d ne’er laid hand on me were it not for the work of a traitor!” He snapped his fingers in contempt. “I propose the same good old toast, gentlemen, were I free to drink it: Here’s to the King and his Council!” and he raised an imaginary wine-glass.

When the sentence of death was read, he stood unmoved, a smile on his lips; nor did he shrink at mention of the rope. He bowed with graceful nonchalance to the court, the old-time mockery lingering in his fine eyes.

“‘Sic eunt fata hominum!’” he cried with a gay gesture; “‘thus go the fates of men,’ a goodly proverb, and a fitting. Well, at any rate I shall have company, and more to follow!”

A little before midnight Nathan Bennett opening the door of the room that served as Ellis’s prison, paused, unnoticed on the threshold, and regarded the scene before him. In front of the great log-fire stood Ellis, his arms bound behind

him at the elbow, with all the handsome lines of his straight figure revealed by the dancing flames. Nathan advanced, saying in a low voice:

“ ‘Tis no use, George! I have tried my utmost, but they are inexorable. Would to Heaven I could save you!”

He dropped into a chair by the fireside and let his head fall forward on his hands. Ellis watched him for a moment in silence, then he, too, seated himself near the hearth and stared into the crimson heart of the flames. Some time passed before he spoke. At length he sighed and said:

“ Alackaday, Nathan, the last night of one’s life is a weary journey, too long to let us rest from memories, too short to loose one’s hold upon the past. Not that I fear death, but the mode of it, for no Bennett ever died by the rope.”

His brother’s pale face, with its despairing eyes and deepened lines of suffering, was turned toward him as he continued:

“ Faith, ‘tis an odd thing, life. One moment sky, air, sunshine, warmth, strength and a beating heart; the next, cold, and darkness, and a sleep of a few long ages.”

He shrugged his shoulders, apparently in unconcern, really to repress a slight shudder.

Nathan roused himself from his dull despair.

“ Great heavens! If it were only that! If it were only ‘to die, to sleep,’ and not the day when

every man must render his account to God. Consider this, and then say, if you can, that you would pass from life with all your deeds unpardoned!"

The strong Puritan faith of his boyhood sprang now to his lips as he pleaded with this wild, unmastered soul. But whatever inward shrinking Ellis felt, he still had power to repress, and what to Nathan Bennett was of sublime meaning, a faith boundless as eternity, was to him but a vague, mysterious name. Nathan Bennett realised that vast inscrutable something that held their thoughts apart, for when he spoke again it was to ask in a low tone:

"Did my father ever know the truth?"

Mark Ellis rose and began to pace up and down before the hearth.

"Aye, at the last," he answered musingly. "I wrote to him and told him all—I know not why—something moved me to it—I think 'twas Hester——"

"Hester?" cried Nathan Bennett, starting up. Her name seemed to him like a dim sweet echo from another world than this. "Hester! You told the secret?" he demanded suddenly.

"Was I like to tell it? But 'twas she that made me do the deed, though she knew no breath of it—because—she was the only woman that I ever loved—and shall love to my death—though I tortured her and made her hate me—hers was the

only spirit that ever moved me to admiration; the only soul that ever stirred me to a love deeper than passing fancy—Hester! I think the name is of witching power—Hester—a star,—a star that drew me even against my will. For she was brave and true as she was fair, and I loved her, and her alone—!” He broke off suddenly, shaken by the force of that strange emotion which, of all earth’s myriad passions, alone had power to move him.

Nathan Bennett watched him with a new wonder, not unmixed with pity. The life that in him had roused all latent tenderness had in this other soul lit only a stormy passion that bore no greater likeness to true love than the drifted seaweed, tossed upon the waves, bears to the pure white lily of the sheltered land. But this he knew; that Mark Ellis in his own wild fashion had loved Hester above all else in his wayward life.

After this there was little speech between them, and the long silences were scarcely broken. Once, when the fire was dying low, Ellis spoke in a tone scarce louder than a whisper:

“We’ve each followed a different road, and yours has proved the better pathway. Mine will end in the precipice—not that I repine. ’Tis ill when a man is conquered, to blame the cause he fought for. But life has a different aspect in the shadows than in the daylight, and when a

man is on the brink of death he may well look at the footprints that mark his way. You forsook the half of life that you might gain the whole, while I stopped short at nothing. When you die, you will not need to shrink. As for me, I have lived my life as I wished."

When at length Nathan Bennett rose to go out into the pallid dawn and gather strength if he could for that last parting, Mark Ellis caught his hand saying:

"Promise me one thing, Nathan. At the end I must see you aside, must speak to you apart. They will grant you that, I think. Nay, nay, I will not speak until the last. Till then, au revoir!"

And the words he had begun so gravely he ended with a laugh.

Over the sombre woods and the wide grey reaches of the Hudson the dawn came creeping, and again the mist-wreath faded above the fort-crowned hill. The fatal drum-beat floated out upon the morning air, and a little company made its way along the rocky road that scarred the cliff to a grassy knoll above the river's edge. There stood a rude scaffold, tall and black against the autumn sky. The company halted and divided, forming a hollow square about the place. The soldiers who surrounded the prisoner stepped back, leaving him alone, while the officer read

aloud the sentence of execution, and asked if he had anything to say before he died.

A sullen shake of the head was the only answer. His arms fastened at his back, Mark Ellis kept his old bearing. Though his face was a trifle paler than its wont, his eyes were calm and fearless as when he rode at the head of his band of raiders, and his lips had lost none of their firmness. And yet as he gazed down on the pallid river at his feet, he faced the whole dark past in the space of a single moment. But now the time had come, for the men laid hands on him to lead him to the scaffold. Stepping from their hold, he turned to Nathan Bennett, who stood pale and rigid, hardly seeming to comprehend the scene. But at that glance he rallied all his strength and advanced to meet his brother. The commanding officer whispered an order to the guard and they retired a little, leaving a clear space, while the two, withdrawing to one side, but still within the fatal square, looked into each other's faces for the last time.

Nathan Bennett had hoped from Ellis's words of the night before that in this final moment his brother might ask forgiveness, and show some sorrow for his wasted years. But now he saw in Ellis's face another feeling than remorse,—a certain eager determination. At his brother's entreaty Ellis's arms had been unbound, and they

stood with both hands locked in those of the other. Blue eyes and dark, the eyes of the man who had sinned, the eyes of the man he had sinned against, read each the other's soul. Nay, not quite, for the purpose hid in Ellis's desperate mind was all unknown to Nathan Bennett. And now in a hopeless impulse of love, Nathan Bennett put his arms around his brother and held him in one last wild embrace.

In that moment he felt Ellis's right hand leave his arm and steal slowly downward. A terrible thought leaped to his mind. There was a loaded pistol in his belt. Could it be that Ellis, in his desperation, would kill him and then make a mad attempt to escape? There was hardly time for the suspicion to vibrate in his mind, hardly time for him to grasp the substance of the thought, before the fearful end came. In the drawing of a breath Ellis's hand closed upon the pistol and wrenched it free. With all his force he thrust his brother from him, then—a shot pealed out, sharp and ringing, and died in countless echoes on the river! Ellis stood, triumphant, the smoking pistol in his hand, while on his breast appeared a scarlet stain no larger than a flower. And now, ere any moved to reach him, he staggered, and sank slowly to the ground.

With a cry only half-suppressed Nathan Bennett rushed forward and knelt beside him, trying

to check the blood that was staining his own uniform a dull red. The shot had entered just above the heart; he knew the wound was mortal.

Ellis laughed fiercely, and pushed him away with almost savage strength.

“Let me be!” he cried, “’twill be over soon!” Then looking up at his captors he added, smiling, “I robbed you of your vengeance, did I not? None of our name die upon the gallows!”

What strange, warped fancy of the mind that a man should live his whole life through in evil, and yet should dread dishonour at the last!

The sun was rising and the little group upon the cliffs was bathed in yellow light—the Continental soldiers in their buff-and-blue, the dark outlines of the scaffold whose bitter need was past, Nathan Bennett kneeling on the trampled grass, and the pale proud face of the young spy whose last mad wish had been accomplished.

As the sunbeams fell upon him, Ellis raised his head, saying slowly:

“ ’Tis All-Soul’s Day, Nathan,—a fitting day for such a madcap as I am to go. Think you that among the rest mine shall find refuge? Your prayers, Nathan, are of more worth than all——”

The sentence died unfinished on his lips. With the last fragment of his strength he raised himself on one elbow and drew a folded paper from his breast. It held some faded blue-bells, fragile as

gossamer, that crumbled, as he touched them, into dust. He took them in this hand and sank back slowly, while into the bold blue eyes that had never drooped for fear of death flashed the old proud smile. It was the last faint flicker of that mystic flame we know as life. From his eyes the light crept slowly, and he laid the hand that held the blue-bells on his breast. Once more he spoke, but in a tone so low that none but Nathan Bennett heard the words, although the voice that spoke was unfaltering.

“Hester,—sweet one—we shall dance together as of old, and you shall give me—blue-bells.”

He drew one long, slow breath; the smile still on his lips, his eyelids closed. So passed that strange and wayward soul!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LAST OUTPOST

BEFORE sunset Nathan Bennett took leave of a lonely grave by the river, and evening found him well on his way to Albany. As his horse bore him onward through the frosty darkness, he raised his eyes to the vivid blaze of the stars with the blank gaze of one who has lost all joy in life. The dull, despairing pain with which he faced the future came from the suffering he had just endured. Three days ago he would have ridden to this longed-for meeting with the woman he loved with a heart triumphant, exulting in its bliss. And now——! Hester was further from him now than if she had been another's, despite that remorseful letter, for he felt that he was in honour bound to release her from that betrothal made in other days when hope had seemed so near. Could he allow her to wed him now, thus binding her whole life to the undying memories of a pitiless past? Far better to renounce all claim upon her love, even though this should mean death, or more desolate life. Long

before the night was over he had decided that this was the only honourable course; he began to think that death alone could free him from the endless warfare between heart and conscience.

When he reached Albany he found Hester had already received the tidings of her father's death, since the report to Gates of the capture of the young spy had mentioned incidentally the fate of the betrayer. She knew nothing of the facts save that the spy was Mark Ellis. It was Nathan Bennett's duty, as before, to tell her that which must hurt her love for him cruelly.

When at last he stood in the little parlour, and heard her light step on the stair, his very spirit seemed to shrink. She was very pale in her sorrow; yet with a pathetic courage on her white face. A flicker of returning hope flashed into it as she beheld Nathan Bennett, then vanished, for he did not turn to meet her, but stood with bended head.

She approached him softly, saying in a low voice:

“Nathan, I have heard it all,—it came to me two days ago.”

O Heaven, had she heard it all she had not spoken thus!

She put her hand in his own, and he suffered it to lie there, but made no attempt to clasp it, or touch it with his lips.

“Hester,” he cried, and his voice startled her,

it was so hoarse and stifled; “ Hester, do but listen to me, and bear me pity.”

His voice shook with an agitation that he could not hide. She was looking at him intently, her eyes wide with apprehension; and now she caught her breath and grew cold with sudden fear.

“ Hester, the man who killed your father, the man who dealt you this great blow, the spy of the Grants, the dread of the Neutral Ground—Mark Ellis—that man was *my brother!*”

She shrank from him with a little cry; her face grew whiter still.

“ Mark Ellis! Your brother! O God, be merciful!”

Nathan Bennett took up his sad story and told it all. He did not seek to take her hand or look into her face; he stood apart like a man already exiled; dishonoured by the poisonous contact of another’s sin. When all had been disclosed, then for the first time he turned to her, his sad eyes meeting hers.

“ Hester, I should be more than coward if I sought to hold you to your promise now. Between us lies the impassable gulf of bitter memories. Without me you may in time be comforted. Think of me as a friend, Hester, a friend who would save you in any hour of need until his life ends. And let me think of you, Hester, as the one woman I have loved.”

Hester's eyes had not left his face, and she took a step toward him, holding out both hands in a piteous gesture.

"Do you mean that we must live our lives apart; that there must be no love between us?" She spoke in a low, passionless voice. "Must you bear the weight of another's sin; must you suffer because of that dreadful deed?" She shuddered involuntarily. "Tell me, can this be justice? It was my father's wish that we should wed; with his last strength he said it."

She waited, almost frightened by his silence; then came to his side, trying to part his locked hands with her own soft fingers.

"Nathan," she cried, "why do you treat me thus? It is cruelty! Do you think I could ever link with you the memory of your brother's crime? That there would ever be aught for you in my heart but love?"

Nathan gently loosed her hands and put her from him.

"Do not tempt me, Hester, to a coward's part. Oh, if I did your bidding, you would live to hate me! Never will I accept your sacrifice so long as there be aught of manhood in me. Forget me, Hester, if you *can* forget the suffering I have caused you!"

But even yet her love would not be conquered; she marshalled all her strength to fight despair.

"God never meant you to do this cruel penance. Because He laid that bitterness upon you, think you He willed that all your life should have no joy?" Her self-possession faltered, and she cried in a despairing sob: "And what of me! if it be not selfish to speak thus? I am lonely and forsaken, bereft of my last hope; my father dead, and he who should be my protector rent from me by a distorted sense of honour and right."

All the forces of her passion pleaded in her voice. "Do you think I would ever wed another? You are cruel to misjudge me. A true woman loves not twice. If you were left to me, then love would conquer memory, and the wounds would heal. I say no word against your choice. Yet know that if you seek to spare me by this relentless sacrifice of self, for every pang you suffer in your solitude I must endure the fiercer pang of knowing that all your sacrifice has been in vain!"

Slowly he turned toward her, and there crept into his eyes the old-time hope and happiness. His doubt was flooded by the radiance of her conquering love. He locked her in his arms, and bowed his head in one low-whispered prayer.

That night he lifted the curtain from his past, and told her all, more than he had told to General Stark in his tent before Bennington; living over again the memories that had come to him in the woods by the Hudson; and finally of his meeting

with his brother; of his recognition, and of the sheathing of his sword.

Hester, kneeling by his side, clasped her arms about his neck and murmured softly:

“God recompense us, Nathan, for all the bitter burden of the past, and grant that our love may suffice to change those dreary shadows into light!”

When Nathan Bennett emerged into the November starlight he felt as if his soul had wings. The old burden would no longer oppress him with its weight, and his heart was as light as the heart of a boy. At Gates’ headquarters he found an important letter awaiting him, which turned his mind from his elated hopes to the path of a soldier’s duty. He was to be sent south to the Jerseys to explain one of Gates’s proposed movements. The errand was important, and, as he was informed next day, required a trusty messenger. The young soldier would proceed down the western shore of the Hudson, taking care to elude the British scouting-parties near New York. He would wear his uniform beneath his riding-cloak, and no papers were to be entrusted to him, in case of his capture.

Two days later Nathan Bennett set out upon his mission. The autumn sky arched ashen gray, and the leafless boughs had no spring-tide joy, but his heart sang its own song. The horse sped fleetly through the frosty air, and though every mile bore him further from her he loved, he laughed

despondency in the face. He felt like a being new-created.

His journey passed without incident till he was far below West Point, and across the river lay the Neutral Ground. Now he rode cautiously, searching river and highway for a gleam of scarlet. For all his watchfulness the danger came. Out of the wood ahead swooped a band of riders, and though he wheeled his horse across the meadow, they seized him before he had ridden ten yards. Triumphant he tore aside his cloak to show the buff-faced blue beneath. At least they could not hang him as a spy! Did he not recall Ezra Robinson's warning? Yes, but he attached no weight to it. He thought it only the heightened fancy of a dying mind.

But when he was brought before Clinton he learned that his was the illusion, and Ezra Robinson's the truth. For Clinton straightway accused him of having broken his parole; and summoned a court-martial to decide the case. It soon became evident to Nathan Bennett that the trial was nothing more than mockery. He had, of course, no evidence beyond his word, nor could he convince a body of men who were determined to condemn him. Destiny threw off her smiling mask, and showed him the grim face of certain doom. Yet it was not till the words of the death-sentence fell upon his ears that he realised the truth.

He listened, almost dazed, searching their faces with incredulous eyes. Not one believed in his innocence!

When he was led to the place that should be his prison, it was more like walking in a dream than treading the streets of a real city. It had not been thought worth while to confine him in the fearful prison on Park Row,—what need, since he was to hang at dawn—so he was thrust into the upper room of a deserted warehouse only a few blocks away. It was already sundown when he reached it, and darkness followed close upon the drear November gloaming. The room was lighted only by the faint reflection of a torch outside the window, yet even this dim light afforded him an idea of the size of his prison. Unable to remain quiet, he fell to pacing ceaselessly from end to end of the echoing space.

Death! The death he had prayed for two short weeks ago; that now Fate had dealt to him in irony. The one thing that he wished was life, and life must be denied him. In vain he strove to pray; to think with calm endurance of his lot. His whole soul rose rebellious against destiny! The martyrs died content because they knew their death was not in vain, and so their souls were lifted above desires of earth. It was not thus with him; his death would be far worse than fruitless; it would be tainted with dishonour; and the name he had

sought to guard from all stain would be sullied with ignominy. Great as had been his sufferings in the past, his present anguish blotted them from sight.

He suffered now the most intolerable of all agony; that of a man who sees before him paradise, and yet must die outside the gates. The very thought of Hester maddened him, mocked him, for while he sought to make his peace with God, it tempted him and drew him earthward. He knew that in the great hereafter his soul and Hester's would find each other; but it was not Hester's spirit that he longed for now, it was Hester's living presence; the pure, sweet face, the gentle voice, the touch of her soft fingers.

And now his restless mind was haunted by a thousand curious fancies. One moment he was so certain of escape that he even tried the massive window-bars, and knelt to examine the brickwork of the wall; the next he laughed at himself in contempt of such folly. Now his thoughts, ever dwelling on Hester, began to paint her future, and now he dared not look upon that picture. What could there be save loneliness and pain?

By midnight it became apparent that some unusual tumult was breeding outside. The street was filled with crowds of demoralised soldiery who shouted and drank, defiant of order. The sentinel in the passage, evidently half-drunken, lurched

against the wall, and sang loud snatches of maudlin songs. In vain the officers attempted to restore quiet; the tumult grew, and verged upon riot. It was perhaps one o'clock when Nathan Bennett heard a clatter of hurrying feet beneath his window, followed by ponderous blows on the warehouse door. The noise increased to pandemonium, as amid shouts and laughter the door fell inward. He had a confused idea that the patriot prisoners had risen in revolt, and were attempting his rescue. The next instant feet came scurrying up the stairs and drunken hands were fumbling at the keyhole. The door yielded, and a man, torch in hand, reeled across the threshold. Behind him in the passage was a confused mass of fighting men. Nathan Bennett, being loosely bound, freed one hand, and springing forward, knocked the torch from the man's unsteady fingers. The place was instantly submerged in darkness, and Nathan slipped softly from the room, passed unnoticed the drunken group in the passage, darted through the unguarded entrance, and ran for his life down the street.

His knowledge of the city served him well, and he made with all speed to the house in Maiden Lane where lived one of his kinsmen. Despite the lateness of the hour, his first cautious knock elicited a response, and the door was opened by a man who stared in due amazement at his visitor. Then, recognising Nathan Bennett, he quickly drew

him within, exclaiming, "Great Heaven, lad, you here in *this* uniform! A prisoner!"

The young man did indeed present a startling sight; for his coat was torn, one arm was still encircled by the rope, and he breathed hard from his desperate run. The keen brain of the patriot at once conceived a plan of escape. He could give Nathan Bennett a horse, and furnish him with the countersign which would take the young soldier in safety through all the sentry-lines save one.

"To pass the last outpost at White Plains requires a written order, and that I have not; you must run the risk of escaping their vigilance. Clinton suspects me of aiding more than one prisoner to escape."

He spoke in a wary whisper, the while his fingers were busy with the saddle. The young prisoner stood by his side, wrapped in a long heavy cloak with which his friend had supplied him. He had refused, however, to change his buff-and-blue for homespun.

"If I die I will die in the uniform I have loved! I will not be taken in the dress of a spy!"

He mounted his horse and gathered his cloak around him, while his friend unbarred the gate, and whispered in farewell:

"May God protect you! And beware the last outpost!"

It was past two o'clock; a cloudy night with a

late moon. The city lay deserted; there was no sound but the faint echo of booted feet upon the stones. He held to the northward, passing the sentinels without hindrance. The city dropped behind him, as his horse, untiring, held to a gallop across this dim grey country.

Presently out of the falling moonlight loomed the wide, bleak woods of White Plains,—the last outpost! He reined in his horse and, leaning forward, searched with leaping heart for a sign of life among those shrouding shadows. Was not that a flash of shifting bayonet there? He got cautiously off his horse and stole onward, intending a wide detour to escape notice. Stealthily, step by step, moving with torturing slowness, lest any breaking twig betray him! Now he must pass the danger-spot, the point nearest the sentry. He saw the outline of the figure, the poise of the lifted musket. If the sentry turned now, he was lost!

And then, as if Fate willed it, the sentry turned!

“Halt, or I fire!” pealed through the quiet wood.

In that one instant Nathan Bennett grasped at his decision. Should he surrender now, to hang at dawn in yonder city? Never! Death if it must be, but death in freedom! He did not halt; he ran on. The sentry brought his musket to his shoulder, and took swift aim at the retreating figure. The shot broke crashing on the air!

Nathan Bennett felt a stinging pain, and put his hand to his breast, encountering something warm and trickling. The thought came to him dimly that it was blood. Then woods and moonlight spun before his reeling sight; he struggled feebly to regain his consciousness, then felt it slip from him into darkness. He fell forward heavily.

The shot summoned the officer of the guard, who came riding up with his escort, and now, dismounted beside the fallen figure. "Another escaped prisoner," he thought regretfully, for he was merciful above his comrades. He stooped and did his best to staunch the blood, and held some brandy to the lips. "Perhaps I do a cruel kindness," he said to himself. But there came no sign of returning life. He felt the pulse, and it was still; he listened for the heart, and heard no sound.

"Another poor fellow gone!" he said, rising and looking down with pity upon the silent, white-faced figure in its blood-stained buff-and-blue. "A strange thing, freedom! Well, we cannot report his death till morning. Draw him aside and cover him with a cloak!"

CHAPTER XXVI

“AND THE SHADOWS FLEE AWAY”

UNTIL dawn the shadows hid that silent figure, folding it tenderly as if in pity of its helplessness. The sentry could not see it where it lay beneath the sheltering oak, and yet from time to time he glanced toward it, as if in fascination of the spot. There was no sound; not even a stirring of wind in the leafless oak; no sign that aught save the dead kept vigil yonder. Yet a figure was stealing through the wood, so lightly that even the dead leaf underfoot did not betray his presence. It halted not five yards from the sentry, and stooped above that dark form.

It was Cochise! Cochise, who had followed Nathan Bennett ever since his capture, who had even entered the city in disguise in his desire to save him, and had not once lost sight of his friend during that fateful journey to White Plains. He lifted the still form in his arms, and then, silent as his burden, he glided away into the protecting forest. Almost five miles from the last outpost stood a small hut built of rough logs. Lonely and untenanted, situated in the most inaccessible part

of the forest, it hid secure behind its walls of hemlock.

Thither he bore the man for whose life he had staked his own, and there he laid him down upon a bed of pine; tore open the blood-stained coat, and all but hopeless, held his hand above the heart. At first he felt no movement, but gradually his fine perception detected a feeble flutter. He did not wait to be convinced. With fierce swiftness he threw himself into this struggle of hope. He washed away the blood; he forced the brandy, drop by drop, between the tight-set lips; he worked with all his strength to infuse warmth into the cold body. It was not till day came that he conquered. Slowly, as the tide turns, turned that ebbing life. The heart and pulse grew stronger, the breath became more regular; Death, vanquished by the power of sacrificing love, retreating, left the battle-field to the victor, Life. The first faint colour swept across the pallor, the eye-lids fluttered gently, and unclosed. Wide and startled, the dark eyes gazed into the pitying face. “Cochise!” he breathed in faint wonder.

“Have no fear, mon ami; all is well!” the Indian answered softly.

Nathan Bennett’s eyes wandered in bewilderment about the hut.

“You brought me here?” The words came slow with weakness. “None can reward you,

noble friend! Death will not be bitter now that your arms are round me, now that I am free!"

For he thought himself dying. What wonder that in the faintness of a hard-won fight he spoke of death? For a time he lay too exhausted for further words, then continued in a whisper,

"Cochise,—when I am dead—you will tell—Hester,"—the beloved name lingered on his lips—"that my last thoughts were of her,—and that I died content because God willed it. Love is strong,—all eternity is ours!" He closed his eyes, and his head dropped back against the supporting arm. "How strong the wind blows! And I feel the salt breath of the sea. Mother, the war is over, and I have come in gladness to my home!"

Gently the Indian's arms tightened round him, and tenderly he touched the wounded breast, as Nathan Bennett, with a weary smile, drifted into the land of forgetfulness.

But now that life had reassumed her reign there was no turning back, and when he awoke at sundown he felt stronger. During the long weeks, moreover, that elapsed before Nathan could leave the hut, anxiety was not added to his impatience, for Cochise had ridden to the nearest American outpost, and despatched to Hester the message of her lover's safety. It was not till the week before Christmas that Nathan was strong enough to be

lifted into a saddle. Even then the homeward journey to Albany was necessarily slow.

On New-Year's Eve they rode into the quaint Dutch city. The snow was piled bank-high against the houses. The narrow streets were thronged with merrymakers, and sleigh-bells filled the air.

Mercifully, Hester had known nothing of Nathan Bennett's capture till she received the tidings of his recovery. When she learned of the part Cochise had played in her lover's rescue the tears started to her eyes.

“Cochise!” she cried, “come hither,” and as he obeyed, she clasped his rough hand in hers. “Cochise,” she almost whispered, “you know of all that I would speak. If I lived to old age, life would not be long enough to recompense, to repay you half; but if there may be aught that I can give you, Cochise, as earnest of my gratitude, tell me, that I may rejoice in the giving, and pray God's greatest blessing with it!”

“Mam'selle,” he answered slowly, and his voice seemed full of some suppressed emotion, “that gift, that blessing, you gave them in your mercy many months ago. Your friendship, Mam'selle Hestér, is enough; for such as I, too great; there wants not anything in life!”

Something in his voice and manner, the memory of the debt she owed him, gave her a sudden shyness in his presence. The colour flashed into her

face; her eyes drooped. Not that she guessed his passion even then; she had neither vanity nor coquetry to prompt suspicion; she laid her strange confusion and the Indian's half-concealed emotion to the vivid memories of the past. Had she but raised her eyes that sad, adoring gaze would have told her all.

Although he had been able to undertake the journey to Albany, Nathan Bennett was as yet by no means strong. His feet had lingered too near the gate of death for him to tread life's pilgrimage with unabated strength. His wound had been too serious not to impair his youthful vigour, though that this vigour would return in time with all its old buoyancy there was not a doubt. He asked no happier lot than that he should live these days surrounded by Hester's tenderness and care.

So the winter was brief in passing, a radiant contrast to that other winter so full of aching fears. For terrible as had been the shock of Ezra Robinson's death, it would have been a thousand-fold more dreadful had not Fate been kind in denying the family re-union, and time merciful in blending all their thoughts of him in memories softened by the lapse of months. The only incident that marred their peace was the news of Parson Dewey's death, which reached them late in January. Hester could not repress her tears, for the old pastor had always been a kind and con-

stant friend. Hard upon these tidings followed others, also of a disturbing nature.

As Hester was making her way along the street one frosty February morning, she encountered a detachment of Continental troops with prisoners on their way to headquarters. As she stood aside to let them pass, she observed that one of the prisoners was regarding her fixedly, and, startled, she recognised Allan Kinsdale. Quivering with excitement, she hastened back to the inn to pour out her discovery. Nathan Bennett listened eagerly, for he had long desired to meet the man who had shown himself so brave a friend to Hester in her hour of dire need. Investigation revealed that Allan Kinsdale stood greatly in want of assistance. After his escape from Ellis he had drifted south into the Jerseys, finally returning to New York, where he had been captured by a scouting-party. Something more than the fate of a mere prisoner threatened him, however, for Gates had heard of his connection with Ellis's band, and brought him to trial as a partner in Ellis's guilt. When Hester learned of his danger she sprang to her feet, crying passionately:

“Never shall they do this wrong! They will release him when they hear my story! I will tell them the truth myself!”

She lost not a moment. Flinging on her hood and cloak, she sped down the snowy street to

Gates's headquarters. She found the General in his room, surrounded by maps and papers. He greeted her with a smile, and dismissed his business while he showed his fair visitor to a chair, and listened gravely to her eager tale.

So it happend that only a few days later Hester was called upon to testify at Allan Kinsdale's trial. Pale but calm, she rose when her name was called, and in a clear voice, audible throughout the room, recounted the incidents of her captivity, dwelling on her impending fate, and especially upon Allan Kinsdale's daring in the achievement of her rescue. The story was frank and forcible, and carried conviction with it. When she had told it all, she paused for a moment, then, extending her locked hands, exclaimed with a charming mixture of shyness and courage:

"Surely, gentlemen, you will show compassion on the man who saved a helpless maid from her captors at so great a risk to himself! I shall not plead in vain! If mercy do not move you, there is justice!"

The members of the court, impressed not only by her plea, but by her winsome face, conferred with each other in low tones, while Hester turned to Allan with an earnest, beseeching glance, as if to show him how much her gratitude excelled her power to aid him. The young adventurer, fearless and handsome in his scarlet uniform, replied with

a courtly bow, then stood calmly awaiting the decision of the court. All his judges were impressed with favour by his frank, manly bearing. To Hester the contrast between their present meeting and that other appealed strongly. Save for that passing glimpse three days ago they had not seen each other since the chill October midnight when he wrought her rescue. Memory summoned every incident of that parting, and for the moment fancy bore her back to the dark old house among the pines. An officer rose to read the sentence, and her heart was leaping with present fears. Yet there came no words of condemnation, but instead: “The prisoner is acquitted of all charges against him, and is now released on parole.”

Hester’s breath came quicker; she trembled with joy. Allan Kinsdale, with a gracious bow of thanks to the court, made his way toward her, finding words inadequate to reveal his gratitude. Polly, who had been much attracted by the handsome stranger, now stood hesitating, her pretty face averted like a timid flower. But at length she gathered courage to lift her eyes.

“Oh, sir, I too give thanks for your release,” she said with shy sweetness.

His eyes lingered upon her lovely face. He could not have been a man and remained blind to Polly’s beauty. He took the little hand she offered him, and there was quite enough of admiration in

his glance to deepen her blushes. Indeed Polly's lovely girlhood seemed suddenly to have ripened. She was not the Polly of old, not the Polly whose pretty feet had tripped the minuet at the Cata-mount Tavern—that mischievous creature full of innocent conceits and childish coquetry. Perhaps that cruel sorrow that shattered her young hopes and crushed her gladness had been the angel in the demon's guise, whose master touch had changed her nature to something richer, deeper, and more tender. But if Polly was less roguish and capricious, she was also less easy to win; she received Allan's entreaties with proper demureness, and although in the end she gave him the wish of his heart, she reached that point by gradual and elusive stages, and proved herself a citadel capable of defence.

On the day of their betrothal Allan came to Hester, leading the blushing but still rebellious prisoner by the hand.

“Wish me joy, Cousin Hester, of my conquest,” he cried merrily. “Faith, I’ve all but lost my life on the battlefield, and am but the shadow of my former self; yet have I done my duty, for since you saved me from the destroyer, I felt it only due reward that I should relieve you of this saucy little witch.”

With the spring Nathan Bennett regained his usual strength, and now there remained no obstacle

between his longing and its swift fulfilment. Through the long months of his recovery Hester's thoughts had turned constantly, as on the night of Ethan Allen's letter, to the recovered home among the hills of Bennington. So before May was waning, when the spring was in its perfect bloom of leaf and flower, the little company fared forth upon their way. But with these travellers there went—unlike the shrouding fears of that other journey—the spirit of undying youth, of May immortal, hopes that were born of the spring-time, and were of the spring a part. That other journey had been toward an alien country, amid autumn and its fading hopes; this was homeward, and love rode with them.

They travelled slowly, caring little how many days were spent upon the road, and so it befell that it was sunset of May's last evening when they came to the store-houses that crowned the hill. They had taken the Arlington road, sending only a longing glance in the direction of the Robinson farm, and now rode down the hill toward the Tavern at its foot—the Tavern whither rode Ethan Allen a year ago this very night. Hester's eyes were stars, her hands clasped in her excitement, and she exclaimed in ecstasy at every tree and stone, like a child at sight of some familiar plaything.

It is enough to say of their welcome by the folk who thronged the Tavern that evening that it

resembled that other welcome of a year ago in its warmth and sincerity. Many of those who came expressed their regret at their former attitude toward the Robinsons, and asserted that Neil Barton had received his just dues in the loss of the farm. Among others came Colonel Ethan Allen and his wife, and to Hester it was the height of the day's happiness when he took her hand in his strong clasp, disclaiming all credit when she tried to thank him. Ira Allen was there to greet her, observing with his old arch smile, "that 'twas evident no rogue of a Yorker had stolen her heart." And when upon this night's rejoicing there stole in saddened memories, Hester smiled through her tears, knowing it was God's good will that sorrow be forgotten, and love atone for all the past.

The end of June found them under the roof of the old home, the home that never again could be taken from them, that should remain theirs throughout life. And a week later Nathan Bennett returned to the army. It was Hester's greatest desire that the two hundred pounds which were due to Stephen Fay should be paid before her marriage. "It will not be long, Nathan," she told him, "and, oh, on the day of my wedding I must be able to say to that noble man: 'This much of that wrong have I righted, this much of that dishonour have I tried to efface.' "

So the year passed; another spring and another

summer laid their mantles of beauty upon old Bennington before that labour of love was completed; before there came to Nathan Bennett the news that the day of his heart’s desire was at hand. During the past year he had visited his home in Salem, to settle as best he could the fragments of his father’s estate. Little had survived his brother’s wastefulness, and, if it had been otherwise, there was too much sorrow connected with the place for him to wish ever to return.

The day before the wedding was radiant with the mellow sunshine of October. An hour before sunset Hester left the house, wandering across the meadow toward the wood. A figure was approaching, which she saw was Cochise. He drew near her, not with his usual swift step, but slowly, like a man absorbed in some grave purpose. He had been absent for some months, so now she said in glad surprise:

“When did you return, Cochise? Surely you will tarry with us for a while?”

“You are very kind, mam’selle; it may not be. I go to-night.”

There was something about him that impressed her curiously; that stirred her with a strange, foreboding thrill. Some anguish of soul seemed written upon his face, engraved in the very poise of his figure. She wondered dimly what sorrow had befallen him.

"To-night!" she echoed in astonishment.

She stood bareheaded in the autumn sunlight, and it turned the brown of her hair to radiant gold; she was clad in the blue-grey gown she had worn three years ago, with the soft lines of her kerchief against her white neck.

"To-night?" she repeated, and drew near to him. Instinctively she put out her hand, and he took it in silence. "But you will come again; you will return soon?" She was hardly conscious of her words.

"No, mam'selle—I shall not come again—unless you need me."

The tone startled her; she raised her eyes. Thus came the knowledge of the truth; thus was revealed the secret that had lain concealed so long! Her eyes widened slowly with the shocked amazement of discovery. The colour, ebbing, left her face the hue of marble. Her hand grew cold in his; she looked into his eyes with a gaze as tragic as his own. In that one flash of bitter comprehension she had read his secret.

Slowly and silently he moved away, with a noiseless, measured step, like a man who goes to the scaffold or to a hopeless life. And motionless still, she watched him go. Once her lips parted as if in speech, but no sound came; she half stretched out her hand as if to stop him, and it fell by her side. Here was a wound she could not heal; a

sorrow she was powerless to aid. Just as he reached the boulder on the edge of the woods, he turned and looked back,—one last look, and then the forest claimed him.

A moment later she heard the sound of hoofs upon the road; Nathan Bennett had returned from the village, and she went to meet him. He saw at once that she was greatly moved.

“What is it, sweetheart?” he questioned anxiously.

“Oh, Nathan,” she cried, “Cochise,”—for a moment she could go no further, then dropping her head on his shoulder, in broken sobs she told it all.

Gently he tried to soothe her. “I have known it long, and I have pitied him. But, Hester, dear, be comforted; though he suffer in loving you, that love has raised him to a height where none but noble souls can tread. We stand helpless, but in the years hereafter God will reward.”

She looked up at him, the tears trembling in her eyes.

“But to think that I, whose friend he was, should have been the one to pain him thus. Oh, I thought my wedding-day would have nought but roses, and there is mixed with them the bitter flower of that noble love. O God, be merciful! Let him forget, and grant him in his suffering some peace!”

Smiling and fair rose the wedding-morn, and radiant as the day was Hester's heart. Polly and Allan had been married a month before; and Hester's first act after the payment of the debt to Stephen Fay was to re-deed half of the farm to Polly. Allan Kinsdale was "Captain" still, for he had resigned his commission in the British army, and was serving now beneath the Thirteen Stars. So Nathan and Hester were married in the old church at Bennington, but Mr. Avery read the marriage-service, for Parson Dewey had slept for nigh two years in the little churchyard. It was a warm October day, and valley and hills were clothed in sunshine. Hester wore for her wedding-gown the dress with its blue forget-me-nots that had been Elizabeth Fay's. Ethan Allen was the first to take her hand and wish her life-long joy, and tradition has it that he accompanied his blessing with a kiss.

Nathan and Hester rode slowly westward toward the old home and the new. It was afternoon of the wedding-day, and above the hills that rimmed the town the sun sank radiant against the painted sky. Behind them lay old Bennington, and as they turned their horses they could see the catamount by the Tavern. Peace was everywhere; in earth and sky and in their hearts. Hester let her bridle fall on the horse's neck, and laid her hand on Nathan's arm.

“We do right, do we not, to put the past behind us? To forget the sorrow, to remember but the joy? I feel that God has willed it.”

“Ay, Hester; for the dead who wrought us bitterness, and yet were *our* dead, they would not have it otherwise. Let us leave them and the past forever in God’s hands.”

“Yes, in God’s hands!” she answered softly, “I am not afraid! Until that day when God shall make it clear, let us wait in perfect trust. The shadows lighten, even as he said; ‘Until the day break, and the shadows flee away! ’ ”

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